

Emigre No. 35 Summer 1995
mouthpiece

write! de

sign!



Emigre No.35 Summer 1995 Mouthpiece: CLAMOR OVER WRITING AND DESIGN, part one of two

Introduction/Circumscription writer/designer/editor: Anne Burdick

Writing and Design and the Subject author: Adriano Pedrosa designer: Michael Worthington

WD40: or, the Importance of David Holzman's Diary writer/designer: Elliott Earls

"To go about noisily": Clutter, Writing and Design writer: Steve Baker designer: Anne Burdick

The Voyages of the Desire (throughout) writer/designer: Kevin Mount

Designs on Painting writers/designers: Joani Spadaro and Andrew Blauvelt

Letters writers: Emigre readers designer: Rudy VanderLans

The Future of Writing writer: Johanna Drucker designer: Anne Burdick

Ways of Looking Closer writer/designer: Denise Gonzales Crisp



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Introduction/Circumscription

Emigre 35 Summer 1995 Mouthpiece #1 Guest-editor and designer: Anne Burdick; Copy editor: Alice Polesky; Production assistant: Rudy VanderLans; Emigre
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So, what happens when the worlds of writing and design coincide, overlap and collide? From new media manifestos to poetry necklaces, the possibilities are limitless, as the close to one hundred responses to the Mouthpiece CALL FOR PAPERS/PROJECTS confirmed. Wading through the flood of submissions, I focused my sights on projects that questioned the implications of verbal and visual representation: the impulses, desires, conflicts, histories, territorial disputes and hero-envy that the act of fixing form gives rise to.

I felt it was imperative that the finished pieces within Mouthpiece explore with both words and form, taking full advantage of the unique opportunity Emigre provides; its history as a forum for visual experimentation, its freedom from a consistent format and Rudy's open editorial policy make Emigre one of the few sites where writing and design can meet on equal footing. However, it was not necessary that all the essays be designed by their writers. The issue of designer-writers serves primarily as a starting point for breaking with conventions and asking new questions (sometimes about old topics).

The work collected here ranges from the conventional historical survey to the personal essay to the fictitious document. Several projects straddle the lines, fusing categories previously believed to be distinct. You will recognize some familiar names and modes of expression, and hopefully discover some new ones. In the spirit of the project, the letters section, a crucial part of the dialogue, is treated as an equal contribution to this variety-pack of voices, (so neatly wrapped between candy-coated covers).

Emigre #36, the second part of Mouthpiece, will continue in much the same vein and will include a lengthier discussion of the interesting projects that are going on "out there" that came to my attention over the course of this venture. There is so much to say, and as you can see, I'm about to infringe on my white space. To be continued.... Bon voyage. A.B.

contributors

Steve Baker is Senior Lecturer in Historical and Critical Studies at the University of Central Lancashire, UK. His writings on the history and theory of design have appeared in numerous journals in the United States and the UK. He is the author of *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation* (Manchester University Press, 1993). He and Jane Graves are currently planning a symposium on "Clutter," to be held in London on February 2, 1996.

Andrew Blauvelt is Associate Professor of Graphic Design at North Carolina State University, Raleigh and is interim chair of graphic design at Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. In his spare time he maintains a graphic design practice and writes and lectures about design and culture.

Anne Burdick is Visiting Assistant Professor of Graphic Design at North Carolina State University, Raleigh and is a practicing graphic designer and writer.

Johanna Drucker is Associate Professor of Contemporary Art and Theory at Yale University in the Department of the History of Art. Her recent critical publications include *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), *Theorizing Modernism* (Columbia University Press, 1994), and *Alphabetic Labyrinth: The Letters in History and Imagination* (Thames and Hudson, April 1995). Since 1972 she has produced more than two dozen artist's books under her imprint Druckwerk.

Elliott Peter Earls received his MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art where his experimentation led him to form The Apollo Program, a design firm, type foundry and multi-media studio. The Apollo Program fonts are available through Emigre's Now Serving! bbs and, along with his just-released CD-ROM(+) "Throwing Apples at the Sun," directly through The Apollo Program.

Denise Gonzales Crisp has been a design hack in Los Angeles for over ten years and is currently a hot-headed graduate student in Graphic Design at California Institute of the Arts. Her work has been recognized by some important publications and she even has a piece in the Library of Congress.

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Michael Worthington received a BA in Graphic Design from St. Martin's School of Art, London and an MFA in Graphic Design from the California Institute of the Arts. He currently works as a graphic designer for ReVerb in Los Angeles.



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writing
(& design),

{
like
everything
else, point(s)
to death.
}

SOMEWHAT
CONTRE L'ESPRIT
OF THIS MOUTHPIECE,
THIS WRITER
HAS CHOSEN

NOT

AT FIRST
I CONSIDERED
HANDWRITING
THIS ESSAY.

TO COLLABORATE
WITH ITS DESIGNER

— no interferences, no supervisions, no dialogues. In the first step of this anti-collaborative project, my aim would be to have what is now still a manuscript function as a testimony of my earnest attempt to approach pure subjective expression, an endeavor to reach that place where the writer could (re)encounter *its* true inner self in writing. But I was to be printed, and the constitution and interplay between the subject of the writer and that of the designer, performed as it is on the stage of the text, have violent unfoldings. In a second and unavoidable step, the *subjective* inscriptions of the writer would therefore be at the mercy of the subject of the designer. Much like in a photograph,

"I (WOULD THEN) EXPERIENCE A MICRO VERSION OF DEATH." "HERE, I AM NEITHER SUBJECT NOR OBJECT, BUT A SUBJECT WHO FEELS HE IS BECOMING AN OBJECT (...): I AM TRULY BECOMING A SPECTER."¹

¹ } Roland Barthes,
Camera Lucida
(New York: The Noonday Press, 1981), p.14 {

In this context, to render this essay in my cursive handwriting would ideally (albeit nostalgically) reveal traces of this writer's *subjectivity*. I thought of graphology and its claim to analyze the writer's character through the study of *its* handwriting—graphology as some sort of typographic hermeneutics not quite *avant la lettre*, but *avant le type*. To submit what is now still a manuscript in my handwriting seemed conceptually appropriate as a radical and emblematic gesture of the violence that always unfolds in the writer-designer interplay.

Let it be said: {

² } "Writing" as "the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription," as "all that gives rise to an inscription in general," writes Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p.9 {

(But design itself is writing, which the parenthetical of my title aspires to account for.)²

As it has been configured, the writer-designer interplay (not an intersubjectivity since the writer is here a subject-becoming-object) is indebted, surely, to Barthes' notion of the death of the author. Barthes' essay, first printed in 1968, addressed the writer-reader interplay *vis-à-vis* the literary text:

"THE BIRTH OF THE READER MUST BE AT THE COST OF THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR."³

³ } Roland Barthes,
"The Death of the Author"
in *Image-Music-Text*
(New York: The Noonday Press, 1977), p.148 {

By bringing this to the realm of the *graphos* [to inscribe, to describe, to draw], attention is turned to one of the many screens that interface writer and reader — not the ones set forth by the immaterial literary text, but the screen established as the subject-becomes-object in the material, graphic text. The immaterial literary text (which could only be said to reside in the realm of the virtual) will be formalized and thus go on to exist on a material level (the paper, the ink: the printed paper). One may thus speak,

"AT THE COST OF THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR,"

of a certain "birth of the designer" (as an *auteur*).

The notion of the designer as an *auteur* is closely associated with an acknowledgment and awareness of what in so-called modernist design and typography seemed often secluded: the subject of the designer. Flawless transparency, translation and representation left little space for it. We here and now are aware of that particular modernist project's limitations

DESIGN KILLS WRITING

and its naïve and utopian features — language falls short, complete representation is unattainable. The “crystal goblet” motto was to be revealed a farce, its

“CRYSTAL CLEAR GLASS, THIN AS A BUBBLE.”⁴

4 } Beatrice Warde,
The Crystal Goblet, as quoted in J. Abbott Miller
and Ellen Lupton, “A Natural History of
Typography” in *Looking Closer: Critical Writings
on Graphic Design* (New York: Allworth Press,
1994), n.s. p. 25 {

5 } The “painterly”, another reference to late
modernist fine arts, is used here not so much to
evoke the gestural (brush)stroke, but rather as an
index to the subjective mark {

6 } Jorge Luis Borges’ “Pierre Menard, author of
the *Quixote*,” originally written in 1939 and
reprinted in English in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art After
Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (Boston:
Godine, 1984), and Sherrie Levine’s *After Walker
Evans* series (in the late seventies and early
eighties) are two fine examples {

7 } “The author is a modern figure,”
writes Roland Barthes,
op. cit. p. 142 {

itself a screen and a metaphor heavily loaded with meaning. However, a return to the subject these days awakens certain modern spirits. Quite nostalgically, the emancipation of the subject in design and typography (rejecting its own modernist canon) seems to fall back into an impulse akin to late modernist fine arts: the desire to mark subjective expression. This is the most problematic aspect of the designer-*auteur* notion and its “postmodern” experiments, as they are repeatedly labeled. With its painterly typefaces,⁵ much of contemporary typography reveals the hand of the designer, conveying the grain of the typographer’s voice. As nebulous and encompassing as the “postmodern” might be, the several aesthetic experiments that were to be gathered under that rubric were always somehow parting from the authorial subjective mark.⁶ In this scenario, the defense of the *auteur* and its subject is always a modern cause.⁷

Reaching design theory and criticism somewhat belatedly, the debate around the modern and the post-modern has given rise to perilous Manichaeic judgments. The demarcation of the modern and the post-modern, so regularly found in these pages in essentializing terms, is the riskier of the undertakings, not only because these notions are so tough to define and are often ambiguous (coinciding, overlapping and colliding), but also because the Manichaeic outlook ignores the complexities and richness of the different positions. For instance, the avant-garde might be *passé*, but as artists we still have an impulse (even if Sisyphean) towards the *new* (which in turn is quite distinct from the *original*). In short, modernism cannot be circumscribed to Ms. Warde’s contribution.

Barthes’ 1968 statement sentences the writer-author to death, but once brought to the realm of the *graphos*, will not spare the designer-*auteur*. The designer, such as the writer,

“can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original.”⁸

8 } Roland Barthes,
op. cit. p. 146 {

Lurking behind issues of authorship lies, of course, the economy of meaning. Despite all advances of semiotics, the Saussurean project of a science of signs remains a failed enterprise; its ultimate treatise, the all-encompassing master dictionary of language, still to be written. I recall the philosopher which Italo Calvino’s Marco Polo finds sitting on the lawn, in the gardens of the great library of the city of Hypatia, surrounded by children’s games: ninepins, a swing, a top. In a lapidary sentence, he says

“SIGNS FORM A LANGUAGE, BUT NOT THE ONE YOU THINK YOU KNOW.”⁹

9 } Italo Calvino,
Invisible Cities
(New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1974), p. 48 {

In this *mouthpiece*, the collaboration between writer and designer (or the joining of these two figures into one) could be seen as a further attempt to fulfill a modern desire of directing the text’s meaning, perhaps a last cry for control. In fact, this collaboration may clarify one of the infinite number of filters which intercalate the tenuous writer-reader interface.

THE VIOLENCE
OF THE
LETTER
PRECEDES THE
VIOLENCE
OF THE
TYPE.

If the subject of the designer and that of the writer remain parted,

10 } Or perhaps the second, if we are to consider the surreptitious violence imposed by the editor {

11 } Roland Barthes, *op. cit.* p. 142 {

Death naturally signals erasure and rewriting. The designer's mark, the designer's inscription, is now recognized as being layered over and after that of the writer's; however, its full comprehension (as that of the author's) is ultimately a doomed project. Again, in the realm of the *graphos*, the designer-auteur is not spared. In writing, it is the writer's voice that loses its origin;¹¹ in printing, it is the designer's. In the end, the designer falls prey to the subject-becoming-object. The plot is inescapable: these are fatal times for the subject, and sadly enough, the designer-auteur is born dead. The text remains open and will only be completed — erased and rewritten — in the realm of a reader, the ultimate murderer.

Seemingly caught between the modern and the postmodern, the subject and the object, the reader and the writer, the assassin and the victim, a contemporary designer may find comfort in this shifty position. To be pigeon-holed is an ever-unpleasant experience. Oscillating between nostalgia and irony, some recent typographic experiments seem to cunningly reflect this precarious position.

Consider Geoff McFetridge's *Teardrop*. Its recurring motif is the teardrop, a melancholic sign shaping its entire alphabet. The teardrop might suggest loss, and the true object of melancholia — this painful disposition characterized by a profound lethargy, an insuperable incapacity to love, a loss of interest in worldly things¹² — is at last revealed: language and the letter. It is not by chance that, in *Teardrop*, a string of letters may be taken as a string of pattern.

LettError's *Trixie* is also a clever response. Taken from a woman's old typewriter, *Trixie* takes me back to a pre-digital moment — when typewriters are not yet electric or electronic, but mechanic — all through the sophisticated means of the Macintosh. The typeface is named in homage to the owner of this outdated, period typewriter. *Trixie*, the typeface, with its unique machinic characters bearing traces of time's patina, carries the grain not of the designer's voice, but of the typist. *Trixie*'s typewritten texts.

Other striking examples include David Carson's *Fingers* and Paul Elliman's *Alphabet*. In Elliman's typeface, each letter is performed in an instant photo booth by 26 performing subjects. What might at first be considered a "humanization" of the alphabet soon becomes an emblem of the subject's capitulation to language, the subject-becoming-letter. Carson's sly *Fingers* is quite ironic as a nostalgic cry for self-expression. As its title suggests, the typeface is constructed with drawings of fingers and hands. "How much more personal can one get?" asks Carson. These days, however, *Penfont* provides an even more personal alternative to Carson's: through mail order, your own handwriting can actually be turned into a typeface and made available in your suitcase.

For some time I was tempted to render and submit this manuscript to the designer in the most personal of all typefaces: my handwriting. Such naïveté. In light of social orthopedics, a Foucauldian notion, handwriting is nothing but a symptom of our "docile bodies."¹³ Recent speculations regarding issues of technology and the body have suggested that the joints which articulate my right hand and would allow me to hold the pen and scribble these very words are no less a technological device than the pen, the typewriter or the powerbook. I thus promptly returned to the keyboard.



designed by Geoff McFetridge

12 } Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," (1917 [1915]) *Standard Edition*, v. XIV {

Trixie

designed by LettError



designed by Paul Elliman

FINGERS

designed by David Carson

13 } Bodies which are trained, disciplined and manipulated, bodies which obey, comply, respond and are ultimately rendered docile through an infinite number of diffuse micro-powers. Michel Foucault, "Docile Bodies," *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) {

THE DESIGNER WILL

ALWAYS
END WITH

BLOOD

ON HIS
HANDS

- THE FIRST OF THE AUTHOR'S ASSASSINS.10

WPD40

ooo

on the importance of David Holzman's diary

by Elliott Peters Ears
The Pop Culture Program

Easter, 1967, \$2500. During a five day period in New York City, Jim McBridge and L.M. Hill Carson drive a stake through the atrocinied heart of the Truffautmovie *David Holzman's Diary*, an independent pseudo-cinéma-vérité film, subsequently won awards at both Brussels and Mannheim. Spontaneous, critical and sincere even in its ironic voice, *David Holzman's Diary* is a masterpiece of modern cinema. This small film made on a virtually non-existent budget and produced in less than two weeks, should serve as one of the master tropes of contemporary design. *David Holzman's Diary* provides a template for the *persuasive* designer.

Early in the film, David, quoting Godard, states, "What is film? Film is truth twenty-four times a second ... So I thought that if I put it all down on film and I put my thumb on it and I run it back and forth then I got everything. I should get the meaning. I should understand it." Thus begins the slipshod odyssey of David's unsuccessful attempt to capture the truth of his disintegrating life on film. During this five year for truth, the film undermines, negates, and reinvents the institutional modes of representation, production and distribution (Hoberman 1984) And, it is precisely through these operations that it is able to carve a space for itself within the cultural landscape. It triumphs in spite of a hostile system that seeks to exclude it. It is a model of creative self-sufficiency and self-reliance. *David Holzman's Diary*, while participating in the tradition of the avant-garde, is not simply "other than" commercial cinema. It is actively opposed to commercial conventions. (Hoberman 1984) It seeks higher ground. It strives for a new definition. "Now you're Play'n With Power."

Mac Warehouse is the Rosetta Stone. It is through this seemingly innocuous publication that we can gain a clear definition of the presumptive designer, and better understand his or her role within society. Direct your own movies! Write your own music! Build your own recording studio! Desktop publish! Do your own accounting! Do your own bringing home the bacon, try it up in a pan—all on the Mac. Elk magazine for the infogenisia complex with implicit inferiority complex. Niki Taylor as Photoshop, smiles only from behind her Rekin pajama and points to the "Real" supermodel in all of us. Pop economist and futurist Alvin Toffler tells us what is important is not consumption or production but presumption (Toffler 1980). For the presumptive designer that implies the consumption of visual code systems and software and their masification, digestion and regurgitation in the form of information products (whether they be a simple letterhead, or an interactive CD-ROM) The lessons we learn: Buy the program; read the manual once (then pitch it out), never, ever hire a programmer, illustrator or plumber; and finally the greatest of Gods laws, always entertain. Alvin Toffler's books *Future Shock*, *The Third Wave* and *Power Shift* chronicle the sociological and economic processes that form the cultural space for a new definition of the designer.

In Six Months for the Next Millennium, Italo Calvino discusses what he believes must be valued in literature as we enter the twenty-first century. Lightness, Quickness, Exactness, Exactitude, Visibility and Multiplicity. In considering Multiplicity, Calvino refers to "The Manifold Text" which replaces the oneness of a thinking 'I' with a multiplicity of subjects, voices and views of the world." This positions the work

within the field of intertextuality and opens the text to polyphonic reading (Calvino 1988). Although Calvino's criteria are but a small part of a larger motif in the lexicon of creative process, *The Next Millennium* seems to provide not only generative theory, but more importantly, stable criteria for evaluation. And it is through this new criteria for evaluation, that we may strive to escape the castration of pluralism without falling back into the fascism of binary right and wrong. New media is a heck full-o-shit and therefore we must narrow the field.

The horses are on the track. Hal Foster in *Reconfigurations* discusses the problems and issues surrounding a pluralist environment. How do we step outside? How do we restore radicality to creative process when pluralism renders all work valid and no work taboo? How can we deal with the ubiquitous and pervasive "legitimation of the subversive?" The work of the presumptive designer must fall outside the realm of current practice and yet still have residual meaning within that realm (Foster 1985). On the personal level, there are a number of attributes that make this possible. Skill within the domain (i.e., a high degree of formal proficiency). The ability to utilize skills of *deconstruction*. Shklovskii's concept of defamiliarization or *ostranenie* ("making strange") refers to a relationship between the reader and text that disorients the object within the cultural matrix. The process of defamiliarization seeks to "illuminate linguistic and social conventions, forcing the reader to view them in a new and critical light." Defamiliarization seeks to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. And it is through this process, that "form" itself is brought into relief and questioned (Strieder and Stempel 1969). To work with passion (love?), rigor and determination. And finally, to accept and become comfortable with creative risk. Ralph Waldo Emerson has said "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts." The presumptive designer's challenge seems to include the development of effective strategies to this end. "The plan is the generator" .. and it is through this that we must strive on a personal level to establish a "Network of Enterprises." The ability to work on projects in related areas (on a common platform) allows the presumptive designer to shift between related disciplines, gain unique perspectives and use lateral thinking to shed light on related problems (Coleman, Kaufman and Ray 1992). Examples are legion. Henry Miller wrote, painted, drank and womanized, all of which were part of a well organized attempt to integrate life and art. Prince plays all those damn instruments, and Thomas Jefferson ... well, Thomas Jefferson. Obviously, these are rather dramatic examples, but the concept is easily and effectively applied to less grand endeavors.

Disclaimer: On top of this testing misreading of contemporary culture, I heap the very value of misinterpretation. Harold Bloom has speculated that each strong poet misreads his predecessors. He postulates that misinterpretation is the constitutive act of reading. As with the slubs that riddle the finest Irish linen, it is my fundamental misinterpretation of all I have "read" which forms the very beautiful ugliness of my personal cosmology. Right or wrong, it is exactly this process of misreading which breathes life into the work (Bloom 1973).

David Hockney's Pictures, filmed almost thirty years ago, seems to address all of these issues in a way that is not only inspiring, but disarmingly accessible. With the leverage provided by the soft tools of new-media, the self-motivated designer has access to the means and methods of mass (micro) cultural production. Successful navigation through the Bermuda Triangle of *Information, Technology, and the Sun-baked shores of paradise*. And yet, even as history teaches us the dangers of calling for a Jihad, we find that "access" and "voice" are worthy battle cries in the larger cultural fight for self-expression.

1. *Next to the Sun* by Foster, Hal Foster in *Reconfigurations* discusses the problems and issues surrounding a pluralist environment. How do we step outside? How do we restore radicality to creative process when pluralism renders all work valid and no work taboo? How can we deal with the ubiquitous and pervasive "legitimation of the subversive?" The work of the presumptive designer must fall outside the realm of current practice and yet still have residual meaning within that realm (Foster 1985). On the personal level, there are a number of attributes that make this possible. Skill within the domain (i.e., a high degree of formal proficiency). The ability to utilize skills of *deconstruction*. Shklovskii's concept of defamiliarization or *ostranenie* ("making strange") refers to a relationship between the reader and text that disorients the object within the cultural matrix. The process of defamiliarization seeks to "illuminate linguistic and social conventions, forcing the reader to view them in a new and critical light." Defamiliarization seeks to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. And it is through this process, that "form" itself is brought into relief and questioned (Strieder and Stempel 1969). To work with passion (love?), rigor and determination. And finally, to accept and become comfortable with creative risk. Ralph Waldo Emerson has said "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts." The presumptive designer's challenge seems to include the development of effective strategies to this end. "The plan is the generator" .. and it is through this that we must strive on a personal level to establish a "Network of Enterprises." The ability to work on projects in related areas (on a common platform) allows the presumptive designer to shift between related disciplines, gain unique perspectives and use lateral thinking to shed light on related problems (Coleman, Kaufman and Ray 1992). Examples are legion. Henry Miller wrote, painted, drank and womanized, all of which were part of a well organized attempt to integrate life and art. Prince plays all those damn instruments, and Thomas Jefferson ... well, Thomas Jefferson. Obviously, these are rather dramatic examples, but the concept is easily and effectively applied to less grand endeavors.
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4. Hal Foster, *Reconfigurations* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 3-33.
5. *Next to the Sun* by Foster, Hal Foster in *Reconfigurations* discusses the problems and issues surrounding a pluralist environment. How do we step outside? How do we restore radicality to creative process when pluralism renders all work valid and no work taboo? How can we deal with the ubiquitous and pervasive "legitimation of the subversive?" The work of the presumptive designer must fall outside the realm of current practice and yet still have residual meaning within that realm (Foster 1985). On the personal level, there are a number of attributes that make this possible. Skill within the domain (i.e., a high degree of formal proficiency). The ability to utilize skills of *deconstruction*. Shklovskii's concept of defamiliarization or *ostranenie* ("making strange") refers to a relationship between the reader and text that disorients the object within the cultural matrix. The process of defamiliarization seeks to "illuminate linguistic and social conventions, forcing the reader to view them in a new and critical light." Defamiliarization seeks to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. And it is through this process, that "form" itself is brought into relief and questioned (Strieder and Stempel 1969). To work with passion (love?), rigor and determination. And finally, to accept and become comfortable with creative risk. Ralph Waldo Emerson has said "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts." The presumptive designer's challenge seems to include the development of effective strategies to this end. "The plan is the generator" .. and it is through this that we must strive on a personal level to establish a "Network of Enterprises." The ability to work on projects in related areas (on a common platform) allows the presumptive designer to shift between related disciplines, gain unique perspectives and use lateral thinking to shed light on related problems (Coleman, Kaufman and Ray 1992). Examples are legion. Henry Miller wrote, painted, drank and womanized, all of which were part of a well organized attempt to integrate life and art. Prince plays all those damn instruments, and Thomas Jefferson ... well, Thomas Jefferson. Obviously, these are rather dramatic examples, but the concept is easily and effectively applied to less grand endeavors.
6. Coleman, Kaufman and Ray, *The Presumptive Designer* (New York: Dutton, 1992), 35-32.
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To go to a b.o.p.: poisily: Clutter, writing a n design

Steve Baker

A story. This is an essay about clutter, and its effects. It has two epigraphs. The first is from Hélène Cixous, from *The Book of Promethea*: You write me. You crowd me. ...I don't comprehend you. I contain you. No longer am I anything more than all your sensing space

The second is from Schopenhauer: The surest way of never having any thoughts of your own is to pick up a book every time you

have a free moment

In his essay on invention, Derrida cites Paul de Man's comments on the impossibility of distinguishing between autobiography and fiction. The present essay is itself an idiosyncratic piece of writing, negotiating its way rather awkwardly between such categories as theory, autobiography and fiction. It, too, is concerned with invention, or at least with questions and

metaphors of creativity, insofar as they pertain to writing, and especially to writing about design. The question at the back of my mind throughout these remarks, therefore, is how to characterize the impact of clutter on our thinking about creativity, both in design and in writing.

When I first heard of Jane Graves's interest in the subject of clutter, in the summer of 1994, I immediately wanted to write

about it too, as clutter had begun to figure in my perceptions in a more oppressive way than usual. My mother had died earlier in the summer, and Aly and I had the main responsibility for clearing her house, about a hundred miles from our own, before it was put up for sale. Now this isn't a complaint about the frustration of dealing with someone else's clutter, as you might expect. The word clutter doesn't seem appro-

priate in that context. These were my mother's objects, her belongings, and many of them were treasured things for her, carrying the memory of my father who'd died some years earlier. It wasn't for me to judge that stuff, to dismiss it as clutter. Apart from anything else, at that point at least, it wasn't in my space.

I knew from the start that I wanted very little of that stuff. My father's small glass-fronted book-

case and a couple of Chinese vases—one carrying the image of a wonderful lumpy white elephant with golden tusks—were the only things to which I had any real sentimental attachment. But one way or another, once all the friends and relatives had everything they wanted, we still ended up bringing home masses of stuff—not only the usual boxes of photographs, documents and so on, but big pieces of furniture

too. I write these words at one of the three dining tables that currently occupy my room.

It wasn't simply a problem of physical space, of course. Once my mother's furniture arrived at our house, it seemed to position itself in the way of my ability to get on with the work of mourning, with figuring out how to come to terms with loss when so inescapably surrounded by the new and unwelcome physical

presence of this stuff—stuff that now undoubtedly constituted clutter.

Like the preceding comments, much of what follows is in the form of personal observations, often unsupported by theory or outside evidence. It's difficult to say whether this is, to speak rather loosely, in the "nature of the subject." The literature on clutter is almost non-existent, and design history has little to

say on the subject beyond the usual descriptive and unflattering remarks about the Victorian drawing room. In any case, it may be that the motivation to write about clutter is strongest when one is actually frustrated or even enraged by one's own experience of the stuff, one's own subjection to it.

Is this just the kind of category that clutter is? That to name it as clutter is to see it in a certain way,

to identify it as a problem, a bad thing? I start from the assumption that this is the case. No space here, then, for other people's joyful revelling in clutter, much as I may envy this way of seeing things. Clutter is in the way, and more to the point, it's in my way. (One cannot *not* be selfish about clutter.)

This notion of clutter as bad stuff makes it sound very much like Mary Douglas's definition of

dirt: *matter out of place*, a contravention of order. Freud said something very similar, of course. Since it's been persuasively suggested that Douglas's approach is rather obsessive and rule-bound—preoccupied "with ritual rather than pleasure"—I'm not especially inclined to align myself with this.

So let's turn for the moment to a broader characterization of clutter. Clutter is the opposite of the

impulse to collect as it's usually understood. It is the impulse to collect *and then hating it*, hating that character trait and passing that rage on to the object.

This is a highly dynamic relation to objects. It builds opposing motivations into them, motivations that must at some point blow them apart, shatter them, and in shattering them, shatter us—like Kafka's account of the axe-blow that ought to be con-

tained in books, an axe-blow to shatter what he calls "the frozen sea inside us."

Seen in this way, clutter is unstable, volatile. It is the object's *wild* dimension, the obverse of design history's meaning-making. Design history's objects don't constitute clutter—it's something to do with their design, their clean lines, the purity of the aesthetic, perhaps of all aesthetics. Is it the aesthetically unedifying

clutter of the Victorian drawing room which persuades us that people like Morris and Pevsner must have been right—such stuff *isn't really design*, not what those of us who are supposed to *know* something about design would call design?

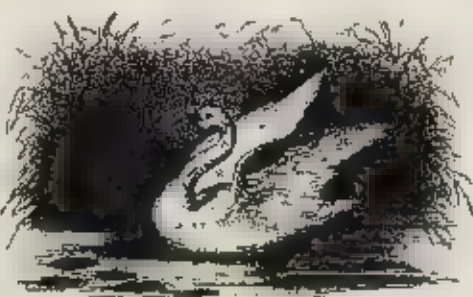
Clutter is anathema to design, the opposite of design. This isn't a matter, incidentally, of modern versus postmodern values. So-called "postmodern" design is

still design, and postmodernism can't therefore just appropriate clutter to itself as its latest chic attribute, the marker of what has famously been called its "anti-aesthetic."

Clutter resists, clutter is stubborn, is always there, still there, still in the way. Baudrillard, adapting Descartes, spoke of the "evil genius of the masses": clutter is the evil genius of objects. Clutter is the object's revenge, on



Victorian Spot Illustrations, Alphabets and O



design and on the world. It is the embodiment of Descartes's absurd and malevolent world. This will make no sense to those concerned with design's rationality. To quote Baudrillard again, it would be "unacceptable, and even unimaginable, to the tenants of this analysis."

Space. What is so desirable about being rid of clutter? The notion of clean space would seem to bring us back to Mary

Douglas, but what about clear space? Is it a desire for *uninterrupted* space and time? This may be regarded as a desire for something mythical, utopian, unattainable—but also, (or so at least Sheila Levrant de Bretteville has proposed), as a gendered desire, with women currently more able to accept its unattainability, more able to compromise, to work within its limitations rather than to rail against it.

Certainly the desire for clear space comprises a desire for freedom, unencumberedness—freedom from responsibility? Is it that we feel *weighed down* by objects and by the clutter of their accumulation? Unlike the levitating Chesterton emblematic of the first issue of the British design journal *things*, clutter generally impedes our free movement (mental or physical), our capacity for flight, for escape. We feel

hemmed in. Is it that those objects which don't do this, and which we don't recognize as clutter, are those which metaphorically fly with us? Those which "fly the coop," as Cixous says, taking pleasure "in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, ... and turning propriety upside down." (And yet here things begin to get confusing, for this unruliness sounds more like clutter

than its absence.)

What is it that seems to free up these objects? Is it their freedom from meaning? Such a view would see an object's "meaning" as a weight, an encumbrance. Why this metaphor? Can meanings be "cast off," freeing the object into the thinner air of unmeaning, like a hot air balloon, into the more rarified atmosphere of unmeaning? The metaphor casts meaning as law,

rule, control, boundary, binding, restriction, definability. The object locked into itself, the object *cluttered by itself*. Clutter as fetter, meaning as fetter.

Movement. Clutter brings me to a standstill. Brings my thoughts to a standstill. Shortens my sentences. Allowing only clumsy repetition. Stumbling. Inelegant. Ungrammatical. I mean this quite literally. My working space, as I wrote this, had become so full, so

chaotic, that I was not inclined to write at all. I went out to the shops, without a pen of course, and these thoughts and phrases came tumbling out, so that I had to rush back trying not to forget them, to write them down against the pressure of the clutter. Movement is the key image here: thought as movement. A familiar metaphor from feminist theory, of course: movement is good, stasis is bad. And move-

ment is perceived as poetic. Cixous writes that "poetry is about travelling on foot and all its substitutes, all forms of transportation." She also says "walking, dancing, pleasure: these accompany the poetic act."

Webster's Dictionary definition of clutter includes the idea of "disordered things that impede movement or reduce effectiveness." Even the mapping of clutter poses a problem. Its delin-

eation is precisely what we seem unable to achieve. Thus our anxiety and our inability to do anything other than stumble through it. Clutter reminds us of mythology's account of our autochthonous origins. Thus, perhaps, the desire for all those metaphors of flying.

A recent example of the metaphor: the translators' introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's *What Is Philosophy?* describes

these writers as "the thinkers of 'lines of flight,' of the openings that allow thought to escape from the constraints that seek to define and enclose creativity."

Why do we assume that the air isn't cluttered too? Perhaps we can't afford to. We've invested too much in it as the metaphoric space of our creativity, a space outside the confines of the law. Cixous typifies this tendency in her assertion that "elsewhere,

outside, birds, women, and writing gather." This gathering represents those interests that "have not worried about respecting the law." Birds and women stand rhetorically for what she calls "a certain kind of writing," for that which will not be constrained or controlled, at least not for long. It is the writing of which Allon White says:

I know that it is there at the fingersends, lurking amongst the

keys, waiting for the right combination of letters to release it howling out at me, free at last.

Using much the same metaphors, and without ever doubting the attractions of the imagery of birds and flight, Nietzsche is altogether more skeptical about space, creativity and the easy illusion of freedom. In *Daybreak*, he writes:

Just beyond experience!—Even great spirits have only their five-fin-

gers' breadth of *experience*—just beyond it their thinking ceases and their endless empty space and stupidity begins.

How terrible: the realization that the imaginative space of our creativity is limited, *cluttered*, by the narrowness of its own metaphorical preferences, and that our conception of creativity is built on its *excluding* clutter. The procedure is little different from what Kristeva calls "the simple

logic of *excluding filth*," by which many societies seek to establish their "proper" boundaries. This is indeed a simple logic—a simplistic, *unimaginative* logic that looks quite at odds with notions of creative living.

My own writing. Usually, when I'm writing (and much of the time when I'm not), all the available surfaces in my room—tabletops, floor, walls—will disappear beneath photocopies, file cards,

scraps of paper, so that the effect is not unlike those photographs you see of Francis Bacon's or Jackson Pollock's studios.

There is a beguiling myth at work here. Writing, out of clutter, like the phoenix rising from its own ashes; or like D.W. Winnicott's account of the psychoanalytic object surviving its own destruction in order to come fully into being.

My own clutter. Can there ever

be anything other than one's own clutter? Does other people's clutter *become* one's own as soon as one is troubled by it? This would seem an unusual perspective on ownership and appropriation—to take to one's self all this stuff *that one just doesn't want*. A new angle on that troubling admission from Cixous: "I take it all: I want what I don't want too." What might be the relation of clutter and desire?

If clutter is always one's own, or always becomes one's own, the question is how to distinguish it, how to mark it off, from the self. Perhaps this is where anxiety comes in, the Mary-Douglas-like desperation to differentiate, to set up defenses. Stallybrass and White see through this in their book on transgression, concluding that "differentiation ... is dependent upon disgust. ... But disgust always bears the imprint

of desire."

I'm reminded, too, of an epigraph from Proust in Asa Briggs's book *Victorian Things*: "Desire makes all things flourish, possession withers them."

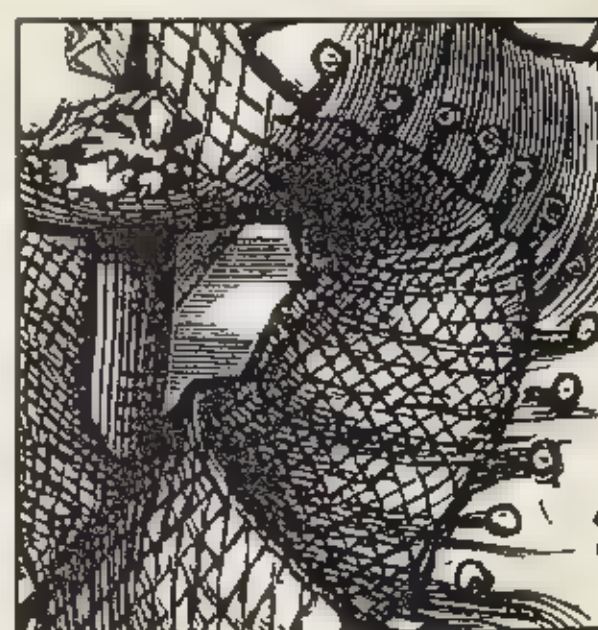
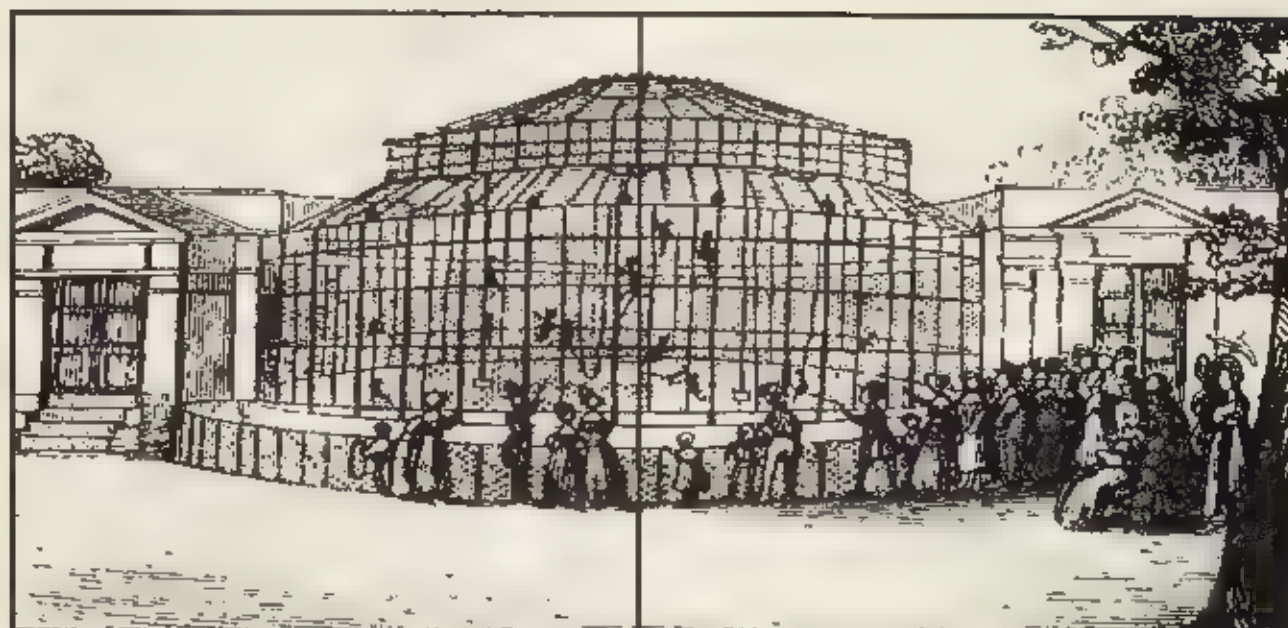
To disown clutter. Despite clutter being my own, I want to *disown* it, to excise this part of the self. Clutter might even be provisionally defined as "my *disown*," keeping the emphasis on *dis* to mark the passage from verb to

noun. The *disown*: that which is marked off, though only provisionally, from the self—but that clings to the self by association, and which is regarded as "evidence" of the self's state of mind. This is to see cluttering objects as burs, which are not easily shaken off.

Our desire is to *slough* clutter, like Nietzsche's reference to sloughing one's skin as a metaphor for the necessity of

being allowed to change one's opinions, to stay inventive.

To create is not to create clutter. This perception perhaps explains why one's writing, one's art, one's designing—the creation of one's good object, as my friend Wendy Wheeler puts it—is not seen as clutter, whereas its *paraphernalia* (the signs of it, the empty husks around it, the piles of photocopies, the necessary support systems) may well be



seen as clutter.

There is a myth—the myth of Romanticism that has already been noted—a myth of writing or creating in a free, clear, pure state, unencumbered, not needing all that other stuff, the footnotes, the references—the evidence, one has to admit, of the influence of one's friends, colleagues, mentors and enthusiasms. Might it be in some sense that the books, notes and photo-

copies are just an *inadequate* sign of this, objects in the place of people, and that one is angered by their dumb objectness, their obdurate silence, their lack of animation?

And yet here's a peculiar thing: there is a certain attraction to the idea of a writing—and perhaps most importantly a design writing—which is cluttered with the evidence of its influences. I'm thinking specifically of a wonder-

ful essay by the designer and writer John Chris Jones, called "Designing as Living?," which is full of the clutter of non-academic interruptions, of the detail of his life and of the lives of his friends, full of cooking as much as of design, and of open-ended references to his unknown readers. Cluttered by just about everything except conventional punctuation, the essay begins: Sitting on the sixth floor of an old

apartment block on a quiet weekend in Antwerp and putting these words on the screen of Pieter's Macintosh while he cooks supper I am glad to have found a way to begin. Designing as living what do I mean by it? Beside me is the cassette radio and several tapes and books including the one I'm reviewing and a trumpet and I hear the sounds of the hard disc and of people moving about and I think about how today as every day someone

does this and someone does that and it's not so much my design as fitting into other people's requests or schedules now and then while making up my life as I go along what next isn't it the same for you and everyone?

There is a sense here of creating, designing, writing *in* clutter, not out of it—a sense that is so alien to our usual assumptions, our familiar metaphors, that we may need to let it settle a little before

exploring it further.

Signs. In November I wrote: "At work my desk is a complete tip. It's been that way since May, and for the moment I keep it that way. An accurate reflection, a metonymic sign, of my state of mind." Clutter as sign, clutter as information.

I used to go into my room and see all the evidence of that academic clutter that I lived with—the multiple tottering piles of photo-

copies I'd made over the years of other people's articles, book chapters and conference papers, some of them now dog-eared and with missing pages, many still unread—and I'd think: "this is a *mad* person's room." A sign in my doctor's surgery reads: "A cluttered desk is a sign of genius." Well, it wouldn't do to announce it as a sign of madness.

This is not a desire for things to be neat and tidy. I have no prob-

lem with the rather trivial idea of untidiness; I'm an untidy person. The problem with clutter is that it's palpably oppressive, not that it's untidy. Clutter is jagged, alien, discomfiting, just waiting for half a chance to cause trouble.

Here's how clutter differs from dirt. Clutter does not contaminate; clutter is basically clean. Thus it's not thought of in the same way as dirt, blood, or whatever—the allegedly polluting

substances that Mary Douglas describes. Clutter is just in the way of the clean sweep of thought—though so long as it continues to clutter, it lacks an *elsewhere* to be put. It is thus *infuriating* rather than horror-inducing. It prompts anger, not abjection.

The mischievousness of clutter lies in part in its ability to *slither*. After months of sitting there, those piles of photocopies topple

over and slither across my desk, knocking over cups of coffee; the furniture barks my shins as I move in to clear up the mess. Elaine Scarry has a good phrase for this kind of phenomenon: she calls it "object stupidity," leaving slightly ambiguous the question of whether it is a characteristic of the objects or their users.

Our sympathy, really, is with the coffee, not with the photocopies that sent it flying. At least the cof-

fee *acts*, takes swift revenge. It does what we "want" to do but don't because it seems too puerile: it *lashes out* at clutter, spitefully, gleefully, randomly, not mindful of the consequences. It is pure invective; it is eloquent—our advocate in the face of clutter. It inscribes our anger at clutter, marking it, staining it.

The lack of an elsewhere. If clutter really is stuff that doesn't have an elsewhere, this would be

one of its most remarkable characteristics. Is to be without an elsewhere to be without a "proper" place? Is this another feature of the distinction between dirt and clutter—that clutter doesn't have an other, proper place? No. Because just as clutter in its proper place isn't clutter, dirt when no longer "matter out of place" is not classed as dirt.

This also calls into question the caricature of the Victorian taste

for clutter. For as Asa Briggs insists, the Victorian's concern for order, especially in the home, was paramount. ("A place for everything and everything in its place.") If the Victorian home was cluttered, it was with a peculiarly proper clutter.

The relation of elsewhere and the proper is worth pursuing via Cixous. Her notion of the "realm of the proper" incorporates all that is orderly, lawful, clean and

regulated. It epitomizes the complacency of the self's self-possession. It jealously patrols the borders of its own, known territory. This realm of the proper, against which she insists there is constantly "work to be done," seems simultaneously to fear the possibility and to fail to comprehend the possibility of anything that is not itself—anything that lies, to use her words, "outside," "elsewhere." This elsewhere is an

unspecified utopian space, but she makes it quite clear that this utopian space is, or at least includes, the space of writing. Roland Barthes appears to make almost exactly the same point, asking "Where is this elsewhere?" and answering "In the paradise of words." In the rhetoric that I'm outlining here, this presents us with the opposition *writing versus clutter*. This raises its own problems, as we'll

see shortly.

The lack of an elsewhere, again. Is it enough to say "If we knew where clutter should be, we'd put it there"? No, such mythical orderliness could only be obsessive. Yet this is precisely design's dominant myth—the object in all its glorious orderly isolation. But it won't do: it's not how people live. Perhaps clutter just *seems* as though there's a place where it ought to be. This is

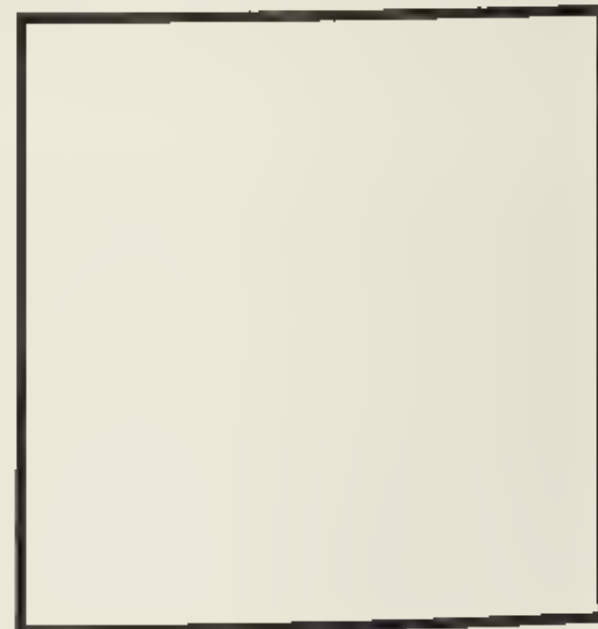
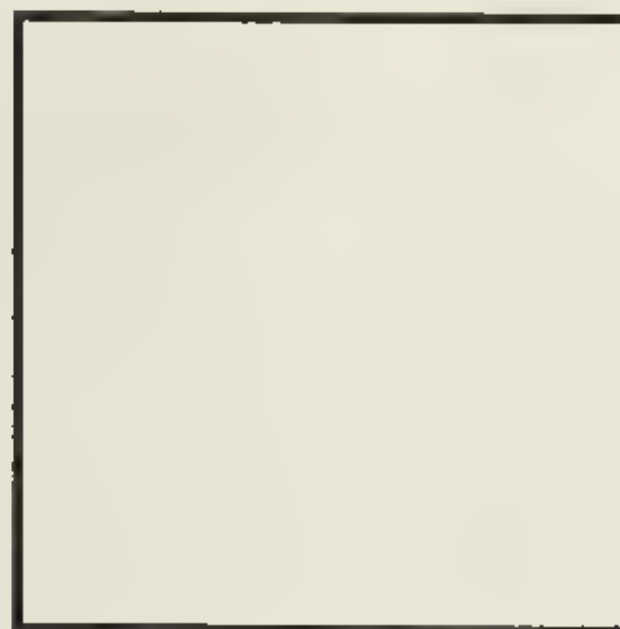
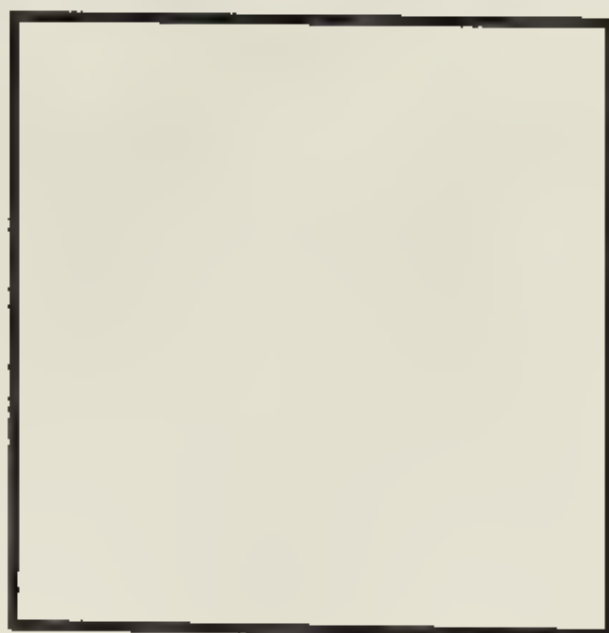
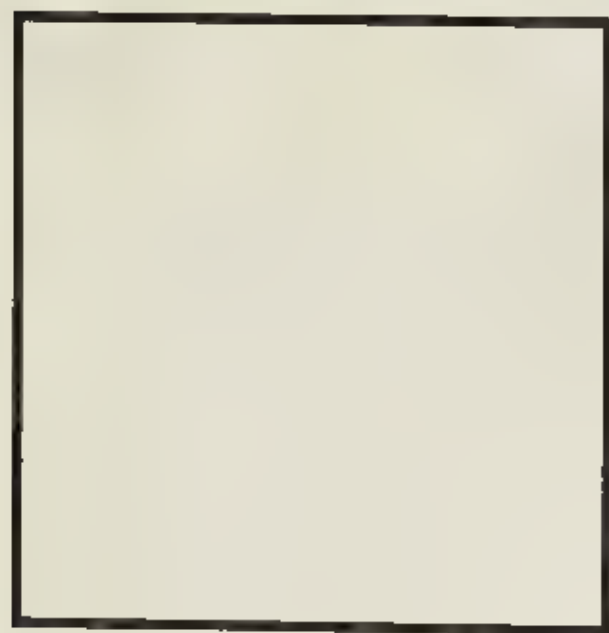
part of our desire—our melancholy desire?—concerning clutter. What we might better try to do, in a kind of obverse of Freud's account of the usual practice of healthy mourning, would be to try to learn to live *with* these objects, not without them. Clutter will not succumb to loss. We're stuck with it.

Towards the end of the month I spent thinking about this essay, I turned, as an afterthought, to dic-

tionary definitions of clutter. Two things struck me. First, the common (and invariably disapproving) emphasis on *disorder*—clutter is seen as a bad thing because it's unregulated. By chance I'd read, only days earlier, Allon White's account of the almost surrealistically regulatory role of many dictionary definitions, so I was immediately inclined to review the *unruliness* of clutter in a more positive light.

Secondly, I was taken by what for me was the unexpected link between the words clutter and clatter, especially in older definitions. One defined the verb to *clutter* as "to go about noisily." Clatter, banging about, going about noisily, puts clutter on the move. Might we, at a push, learn more easily to live with objects which struck us as having the independence, the drive, the will, to "go about noisily"?

Writing versus clutter. The word's noisiness and clutter's noisiness. These two will not be easily united, and may stand as one small instance of the wider problematic relation of writing and design. It is all too easy to use a flurry of words to launch ourselves above clutter into the utopianism of writing. We might propose, for example, that the noisiness within clutter must be drawn into writing, embraced by



writing, celebrated and applauded by writing, must fill the "sensing space" of writing, so that clutter is no longer *written about* (in the cool clear distant abstraction of unimpeded thinking space) but will instead simply be *written*. And the problem there?—that writing has (in true ekphrastic style) effaced its object, has appropriated and sublimated its noisy physicality. This is not unlike Rosalind

Krauss's account of how the critical reception of Pollock's work sought to draw up his drip paintings from the mess of the studio floor and to fix them instead on the clear orderly space of the gallery wall. With tongue in cheek, she describes how the right words—Clement Greenberg's words—achieved "the full redemptive gesture, the raising of the work from off its knees and onto the grace of the wall in one

unbroken benediction, the denial of wild heedlessness in order to clear a space" for its proper, orderly, aesthetic interpretation. The process was an attempt "to sublimate, to raise up, to purify," she summarizes.

The sublimation of clutter would be equally preposterous. It presents the image of clutter miraculously rendered beautiful by writing—an absurd cop-out.

Excess. I want briefly to make

some distinctions between the terms clutter, mess, disorder and excess.

Mess can simply be the disorder of one's own non-oppressive objects. Clutter, as it's presented here, is not only a disorder but an *excess* of those objects. It's the crowding element that matters here. Clutter is the power of objects, precisely equivalent to the power and *irrationality* of the crowd, which is vividly described

in Elias Canetti's book *Crowds and Power*. Clutter operates like Canetti's crowd, especially with regard to destruction. It "likes destroying houses and objects: breakable objects like window panes, mirrors, pictures and crockery." Canetti is clear that this is above all "an attack on all boundaries," on the "most vulnerable" parts of the house, and he concludes that "once they are smashed, the house has lost its

individuality."

The crowding element of clutter is what causes our anxiety, as well as our anger. It seems to be self-motivating, out of our control. Clutter is that part of our "self" that escapes "our" control, "proper" control, and is all the more galling for being represented by dumb objects, *disobedient* objects.

Excess, of course, can be presented quite differently—as a

glorious pleasure, as Barthes frequently proposed, or as an essential feature of the imagery of postmodernism, as Wendy Steiner suggests in an essay on "Postmodernism and the Ornament," where she significantly groups the terms "excess, supplementarity and play." From this postmodern perspective, clutter certainly escapes what has been called the "formal containment" of modernism—in its excess,

clutter is the very expression of uncontainment.

But is this enough to make it a postmodern phenomenon? I don't think so. Because postmodernism—at least in such fields as art and design—still wants to name, to control, to aestheticize its objects as postmodern, thus rendering them safe, or safer. Or again, maybe more convincingly, clutter's escaping of modernism's containment is not enough to

render it postmodern exactly because clutter is that oddest of phenomena, an excess of uncontained stuff *with nowhere else to go*. Out of control, out of order, but stuck where it is.

Returning to one of our central themes—the relation of clutter and creativity—it is of course possible to view unruliness and disorder as a necessary part of playful, creative living. And designing. And writing. Derrida's

essay on invention, to which I referred earlier, proposes that there are only two major types of invention. "On the one hand, people invent *stories*," he says, "and on the other hand they invent *machines*, technical devices or mechanisms, in the broadest sense of the word." But it is what these two types have in common that matters here. Derrida writes:

An invention always presupposes

some illegality, the breaking of an implicit contract; it inserts a disorder into the peaceful ordering of things, it disregards the proprieties. This might suggest that the unruly disorder of clutter is *conducive* to invention, to creativity, or at the very least that it is structurally similar.

Some caution is called for. The temptation, in these last remarks, to celebrate those aspects of clutter that can be aligned with

excess and disorder stems from a desire to find or to devise some way of saying that clutter is a good thing, instead of that it is a bad thing. It's just a different form of sublimation. Things haven't turned out differently at all. (We may wonder, in passing, and against our better judgment, if this failure isn't somehow *built into* French theory, always already there, echoing Barthes's famous observation

that "we always fail.")

The stubbornness of objects: we are always defeated by them. Writing's failure: always to seek meaning, even when claiming not to do so. Clutter isn't impressed by Derrida. Clutter resists; clutter is in our way and it stays there.

And maybe the anger we feel is the crucial thing here. We are not and will not be reconciled to living with clutter. Our anger at it

is an "improper" response—designed objects are not meant to prompt anger. Anger is a genuinely non-aestheticizing response. Whereas the impulse to write seems almost inevitably an impulse to control, to impose meaning, to aestheticize—ekphrasis in its worst light. But writing, it seems to me, can't get a proper grip on clutter, and *that's why we hate it so*.

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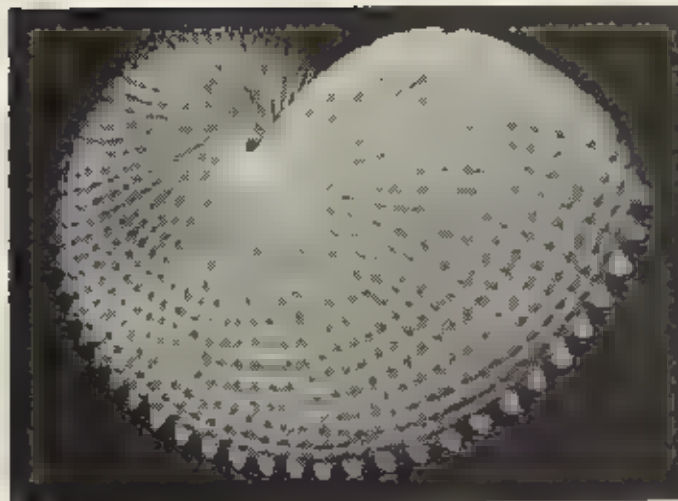
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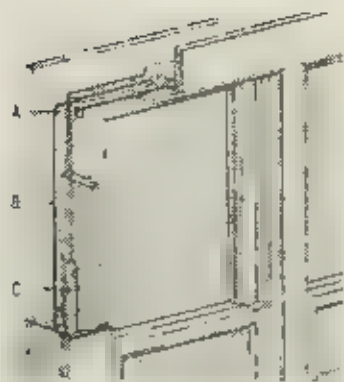
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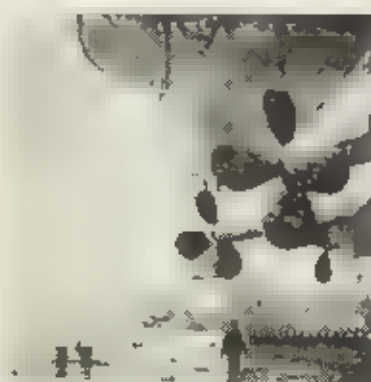
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250 belongs to dreams in which the eyelids seem glued shut. The dreamer loses his
 254 place. He stumbles into a labyrinth of familiar objects—sofa backs, an ironing-
 board, the corner of the Frigidaire. He feels his way to an open door, out along
 a thin passage to the top of the stairs, but everything around him darkens with
 each step until, on the edge of some vague disaster vaguely perceived, in re-
 256 sponse to a desperate straining and tearing, the eyes peer through the narrow-
 ing crack for just long enough to stretch a steadying hand across the drop or to
 catch the falling knife.

Whereas, now in this contrary condition, tottering lamps, broken sashes,
 elusive switches all eclipsed, I am tormented by an inner light that puts every
 itch of the imagination into pin-sharp focus. No back streets of blowing smoke
 260 or skidding cars to obscure the interior landscape of signs; no mutable darkness
 to swallow up dark shapes; no colour to absorb colours; no grain or grit to smooth
 surfaces away. The field ice presses closer in, it squeals and shrieks like rubber
 257, 259 shoes in a ballroom; its edges whiten, its surface gleams. With this result: that
 whatever I try to fend from my thoughts (perhaps because it seems to represent
 some aspect of the voice of so-and-so, or comes with some glimpse of lips part-
 263, 264 ing behind glass, or represents some disappointment or unhappy discovery)
 retreats only so far, then comes surfing back, metallic, faceted. Nothing else!
 Otherwise only white!

Some hallucinations are very harrowing. For example:

255 The *grey heron* or some other crane or snake-bird circling, because of the inter-
 fering sharpness of the beak, the patience and watchfulness of the eye, the
 slenderness of the legs, the slackness of wings in flight. Also because of the
 elaborateness of the rendering, every feather distinct, every shaft and after-
 shaft, every quill, vane or vexillum brushing up against the cheek.

252, 253 The *Nautilus* or the snail-shell, which grow only at the tip (and so without chang-
 ing shape), because of the resemblance of their spiralling porcelain interior
 to the bones and delicate cavities of the ear, because to seem to see one dan-
 251 gling before the eyes like a swinging noose, like a coiled cone (O trunk of
 elephant! O chameleon tail!) is to be reminded of the relentlessness of na-
 ture. This on a day when it came to us, labouring on, hauling the boats be-
 hind us, that we were like mice caught on a treadmill cage. Faster than we
 259 lugged ourselves north, the ice floated us south. From counting steps or
 oarstrokes we knew we had rowed and marched eleven miles, but when we

stopped to rest we reckoned we must be three miles behind the point from which we started. And as we slept we drifted further back: Wednesday, Tuesday, Monday.

- A *narrow road bridge* that joins the halves of a city, because of the shape of the arches and the force of the torrent beneath, because of what might be thrown haphazardly together or disconnected, also because of the passing-places tucked in corner-wise at each side, where one must wait for the signal to change, not knowing who will drive across until he or she makes the turn and draws up alongside, momentarily door to door, mirror to mirror. 260-2
- The defences of the *porcupine fish* because of what its poisonous spines might dent and prick, also because of the horrible bloating of deep sea fishes, on being netted and hauled up, and what it might seem to signify. 264
- A photograph of the *Fortunate Islands* from the air, because of the similarity between the largest of the four and the shape and surface of the shoulder. 265
- The *letters of the alphabet*, because of the susceptibility of the blinded man to sentimental verse read aloud, as if it had been written for him specially.
- An *open book*, a field guide of some description, unusually where one may find clues to the existence of countries or sensations forgotten or undiscovered, to birds, flowers, insects and precious stones so far uncatalogued, in particular to their colours; also references to the transmutation of the ordinary to the unfamiliar, particularly to faces altered by affection, the expression changing as one moves closer, imprinting itself eye into eye. (Phantom faces then appear and are disassembled as if to prove the point.) 263-4
266-7

Sometimes the illusion is not of any object or occurrence. Instead a description or definition is written on the glare as though in ink; or else some remembered conversation, word for word. So I might recall how you tugged at my coat, saying, 'There must be someone climbing after us; didn't you hear someone on the stair just then? And didn't you notice that pink convertible turning in, just as the lobby door was swinging shut? Surely to Christ there must be a light in here somewhere!' And the words will accumulate as they are uttered, one clause floating up as the next is spoken, punctuated perhaps by the apparition of a skidding car or by a shadow passing across a stairway wall. Or else the sequence may break down altogether, creating the impression, for example, that we were the ones driving, wheels spinning, leaving a trail of smoke, having jumped a red light on the narrow bridge during the journey back from Fortunato's. This is 257
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268-9
260-2



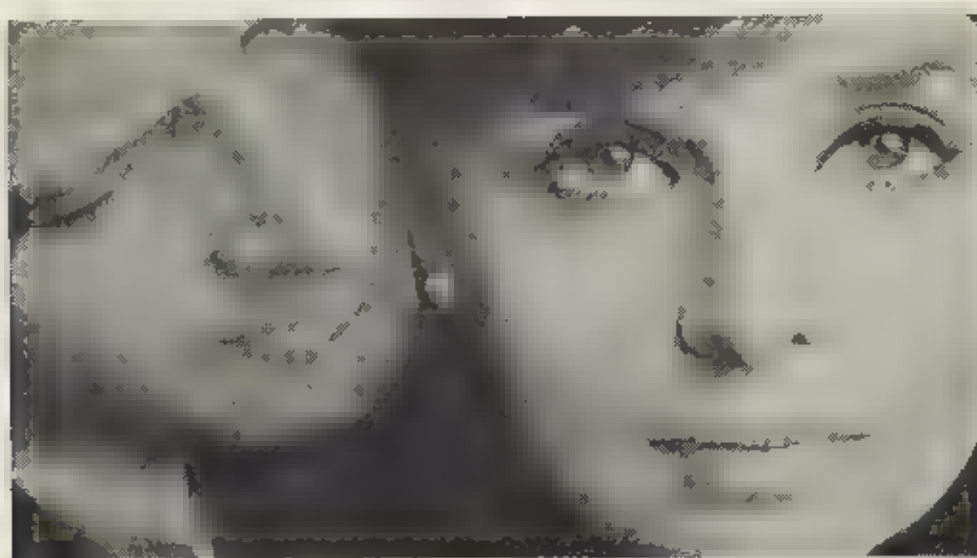
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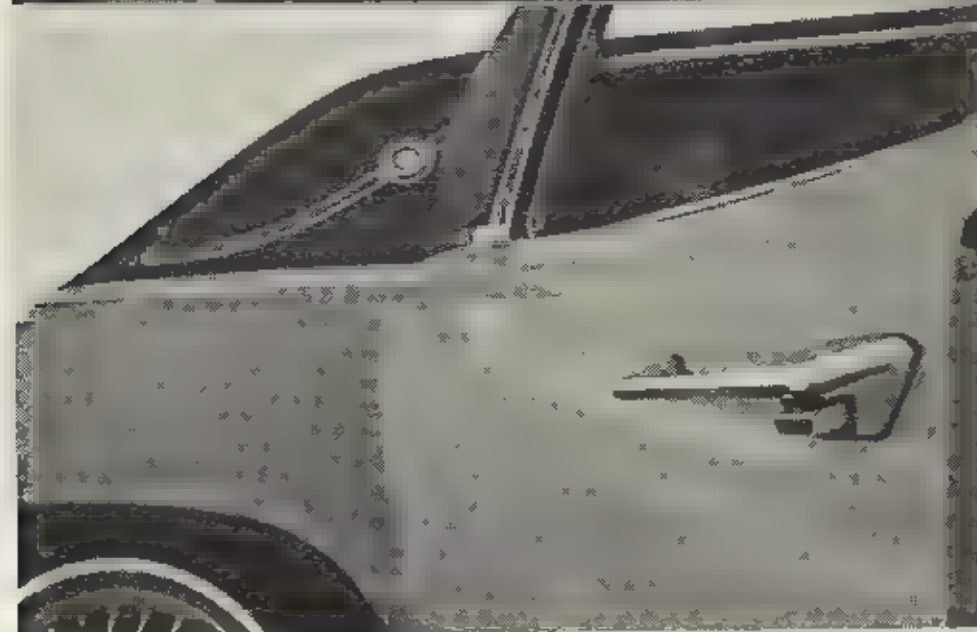
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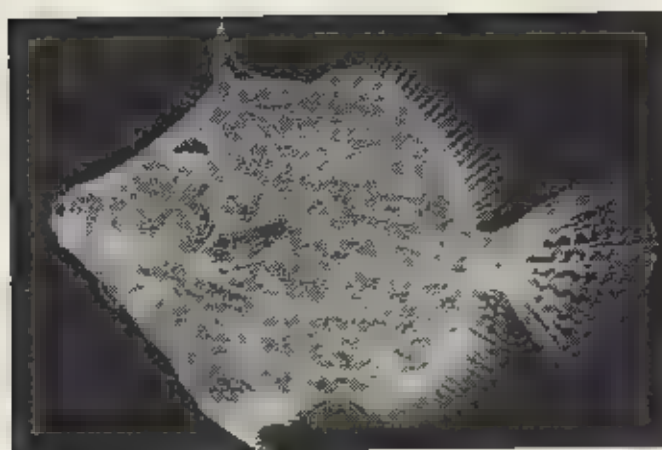
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DESIGNS OF PAINTING

(PROVIDED BY O)

grite

"i would like to
like a painter.

i would like to
write
like painting."

hélène cixous

joani spadaro + andrew blauvelt

this is a confession i share

i've read the words of writers fruitlessly trying to "capture" painting and i've seen the works of painters fruitlessly trying to "capture" words. this striving towards the immobilization of meanings, the fixity of the moment, the stillness of a scene, the desire to name, to render, to define—these are all the un/necessary motivations of writers and painters. what they share is not some "metalanguage" of expression but the same struggle for control and mastery of representation as well as the desire to be in the realm of the other.

what does it mean to write like a painter? to write like painting? i have asked myself before if it were possible to design like a painter, even to "paint with type," but never, until now, to write like a painter. i desired the spontaneity that seemed lacking in design, the cumbersome stages of mechanical reproduction. the instantaneous nature of painting—brush to surface—was never the same as the protracted nature of printing: mechanical to film to plate to blanket to paper. for me then and now, painting will always be other, free of the constraints imposed by design (itself a myth, i know). this estrangement from design is the very basis of painting's attraction and fascination for me.

silence

speaking of painting

"hence the fact that classical painting spoke — and spoke constantly — while constituting itself entirely outside language; hence the fact that it rested silently in a discursive space; hence the fact that it provided, beneath itself, a kind of common ground where it could restore the bonds of signs and the image." — M. Foucault

the still life, the portrait, the landscape, all of these and others, belong to the realm of classical painting. There are no words in these works yet they manage to speak, locating themselves within their traditions and in their relationship to the world beyond their frames. There is another sense in which paintings speak. In their use of words, in their appropriation of the materiality of language here the presence of words is ambiguous. Their presence in the space of the painting provokes us to consider several possibilities. The impulse to name (when words take on the significance of titles), the compulsion to tell (when words are material evidence of a voice we assume to be the painter's), the symptomatic appearance of words on the surface (like so many subtitles translating a foreign language), a substitution for a pictorial depiction (like verbal short-hand), condensing and evoking a multitude of ideas in a single utterance.

Your painting announces itself as a landscape — those very words embedded in the ground just beyond this frame. This work speaks but is labeled "silence." The proper cursive type tells of two traditions: the didactic writing lessons of grammar school and the enigmatic pronouncements of artists such as Broodthaers and, before him, Magritte.

All of your paintings incorporate words. You say that you do not want to write and that painting is not writing. Without collapsing painting into writing, perhaps we can simply fold one onto the other. The place where writing and painting meet, the place they overlap, seems to be the word. In this place the word is not properly or exclusively language or writing; the word is transformed by painting, acted on by the painter. We seem to share an attraction to words. The appearance of words in your paintings is a not-so-ironic occurrence considering your hesitant relationship to language, writing and speaking. Yet you say that painting is not speaking but silence. I am reminded here of a statement that bell hooks makes: "Language is also a place of struggle. To me, the effort to speak about issues of 'space and location' evoke pain. The questions raised compelled difficult explorations of 'silences' — unaddressed places within my personal, political and artistic evolution." Is your relationship to language the site of this silence?

I was first drawn to the materiality of words when I saw the work of language-based conceptual artists like Joseph Kosuth, Ed Ruscha and Lawrence Weiner. Although the attraction was the cerebral nature of the work and its refusal of the conventions of pictorial representation, it was also primarily attractive because of the materiality of language—the physicality of words. These works do not speak in silence, but they do provide a tension between speaking in language—often of language—and existing differently (visually, materially, physically) than "mere" language. This is the difference between the poetic and prosaic potential of words while I learned the craft of typography in graphic design, I learned about the poetic potential of the word from these conceptual artists. I wonder if this lesson was possible only because these examples existed within the realm of art—removed from the messy realities of commerce. Later, I saw the design work of Weiner and realized that while the messages may have been more pedestrian, the material presence of those words remained the same. Today, I continue to be amazed at the ways in which words resonate, whether a subway sign or a painting.

The word is an element, a form, a fragment, a thing implied. The viewer completes the text and writes the story. The word is text. And texture. Language is occlusive—it interrupts my voice. This interruption is the silence of the painting. The space of inquiry and yes, of pain, immovable, permanent.

[illegible]

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passionate, particular, and active. In this is often the diaristic voice.

already there." The body, my body, leaves me mute. I am a cow

The place from where you speak is also the
space outside of language. This space is the personal experience recorded by the body. The body is the real point of writing.

To write from the body, of the body. Is it possible? Is this the space of autobiography?

the voice and the body

*It is my hope that they, my voice and my body are "simply
rd. I paint that fear, I hold my breath, and hope no one sees.*

"writing in the feminine. And on a colored sky. How do you inscribe difference without bursting into a series of euphoric narcissistic accounts of yourself and your own kind? Without indulging in a marketable romanticism or in a naive whining about your own condition? In other words, how do you forget without annihilating? Between the twin chasms of navel-gazing and navel-erasing, the ground is narrow and slippery." — Trinh T. Minh-ha

forgetful framing

Looking and reading seem so natural within the space provided by the frame—the edges of the painting and the page of the book. It is here, within the frame, that a significant portion of the imaginary is presented—offered to us by the maker. This naturalness is transgressed when the impossibility of what we are seeing is realized or when the artificiality of the representational conceit is revealed to us. This rupture in representation reminds us that we are always in the process of forgetting; ignoring the frame, the screen, the page, the canvas, the strokes, the letters — our knowledge of its making participation in representation requires this selective amnesia. There is always that moment when such self-consciousness dissolves and reappears — like an oscillation between

The frame is only important insofar as it defines a space, gives us a place for imagining the forgettable. Helene Cixous uses Edgar Allan Poe's story, The Oval Portrait, to discuss this phenomenon of forgetting, or more specifically of erasing: "...in the course of reading we have ourselves become the painter. We too have followed and started painting and forget

ting and erasing the narrator in particu-
lar, which is very strange. Now this act
of erasing, of nullification and voiding
is a very powerful gesture. We know its
oppressive potential to silence very
well. For Cixous this gesture is empower-
ing in its liberation of the reader, by
the reader, on the part of the author. I
know that in many of your paintings,
words remain buried beneath layers of
paint, themselves written and erased.
Some words remain fully covered or erased
but others remain partly visible. Is this
palimpsest, a record of what might be
called the "struggle against forgetting?"

detached observer, the omnipresent
measure in history, this is
to put oneself over—
agreed—
zero
of st. on

the collaborative action becomes
itself a palimpsest—struck through
with the traces of writing and
rewriting the text, drawing and
redrawing the image. A document of
every action and reaction, it nei-
ther offers itself as finality or
closure but rather as alterable,
unfinished, open. In the space of
the palimpsest every voice, every
act, every stage is a trace of
a history of its construction and
deconstruction. Every act of erasure
leaves a trace of its former exis-
tence and these traces, these voices,
these stories become progres-
sively repressed, further embedded
into the surface as a tale told from
many perspectives, voices intermin-
gle and thoughts intertwine. This
process threatens a homogenous uni-
vocality, which is the danger of all
pluralisms: to collapse differences.

Or the struggle against memory. The struggle to forget. The struggle to remember differently.

The physical act of writing and erasing becomes a meditation on forgetting.

I have notebooks filled with words that connect my mind & thoughts. Many of them are words I've never seen before.

[illegible][illegible]

Dear *Emigre*,
I agree with Mr. Keedy and the basis of his ideas concerning modernism and its refusal to die (*ZOMBIE MODERNISM*, *Emigre* no. 34). What I can't agree with are his tactics for making that long suffering argument. Mr. Keedy sights examples of the lengths that modernists have had to employ in order to stay alive; even the retroactive re-shaping of the ideology of modernism to encompass ideas that might be considered postmodernist. He says that his "aim in this essay is to examine modernism in design, not make a case for post-modernism" (p.32) but what he actually does is stoop to defend postmodernism against the outlandish claims of the "Zombie Modernists" by drawing upon a number of ideas that move the modernist/postmodernist debate squarely onto the playing field of the modernist. By limiting the discussion to the very criteria that was used to define and defend modernism (and therefore to dispel the validity of postmodernism), Mr. Keedy enters that nether world with at least one hand tied behind his back.

Mr. Keedy finds fault with prescribing historical precedence to the visuals that have come to represent the theory of postmodernism. By entering into a debate that addresses ideas of originality, Mr. Keedy invokes a modernist criteria for evaluation — remember, we postmodernists know that originality is dead and that's O.K. Likewise, differentiating between art and design is clearly not an idea that any deconstructivist would ever approach; the distinctions are similar to the old labels that modernist art critics, such as Clement Greenberg, used to proclaim that the best paintings were those that were most clearly paintings, not those trying to create spatial illusion like a sculpture. Aren't divisions like art and design passé? It sounds as if Mr. Keedy is rephrasing the old war cry "The avant-garde is dead, long live the avant-garde."

Mr. Keedy makes an illogical assertion that modernism and postmodernism are political terms allied with conservatism and liberalism respectively. Despite his political conservatism, Newt Gingrich actually represents a strong postmodernist thinker. He has advanced the idea of cutting the size of government and allowing for more private enterprises that would presumably provide

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Garrulous praise

MAIL / DIALOG

Dear *Emigre*, I have been reading, looking at, unpacking *Emigre* for a few years now, and my satisfaction with the general level of type and design interrogation found between the magazine's lovely pages has been high. I sometimes wonder, however, why Rudy VanderLans resists the implications of his arguments while clearly understanding where they reside. His No. 34 essay *RADICAL COMMODITIES*, while both thorough and incisive, suffers from what I find a cloying generosity in that it locates instances of free-spirited, improvisational graphic design, but diminishes the context of their production. David Carson and Henry Rollins — both interesting guys and admirable impresarios of certain rapt markets — are hardly in a league with Jeffery Keedy and Zuzana Licko, at least in terms of legitimate intellectual and democratic investment in their respective projects. Forget about McLaren, who's little more than a desperately well-dressed Tory. This has nothing to do with Keedy and Licko having spent more time in publishing and design; it reveals instead that JK and ZL are vastly more telescopic in the way they perceive everyday attitudes toward the demise of modernist tyrannies and the emergence of a true postmodern sensibility.

The *Emigre* crowd has always reminded me, in their practice, of George Balanchine, who immersed himself in the rules of classical choreography so that he could

rewrite them. The object, in spite of this lurking deconstruction of received principles, was the same as his predecessors: to achieve beauty. When pressured by traditions, he absorbed what was foisted on him before pressing back. This sort of edgy neoclassicism is what sets *Emigre* off from more commercial exponents of the *Emigre* aesthetic (you'll forgive the accusation)

Emigre, to my eye, has never viewed beauty as an event to be discovered haphazardly or accessed through transcendent corridors. Rather, *Emigre* has sought to exploit the tensions that an honest scrutiny of contexts reveals as existing between one way of doing things and an unexplored other way of getting things done. Had RVDL examined this aspect of *Emigre*'s project, rather than dithering around with a legitimization of peripheral market forces and stalling for time by slathering various clods with undeserved credit, I would have much more thoroughly enjoyed his piece. When garrulous praise prevents one from speaking the truth, it's time to clam up and deal with what one has become, which in this case is a qualified arbiter of good design — and its environments — too liberally distributing his accolades

VTJ.

Matthew DeBord, Associate Editor and Design Director Nka *Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Production Editor Routledge, USA

Some scribbling

[DEAR EMIGRE] This isn't necessarily a letter, just some scribbling that occurred after reading *Emigre* 33 and 34: Oh, the golden age of the *Emigre* (or Cranbrook, Cal Arts, "Ugly," etc...) School will surely come to pass and find itself snugly nestled in history, alongside its divine predecessor, the Bauhaus. Young designers, each gifted artisans armed with the latest hi-tech "tools" and historical hoopla, will look back from their not-so-distant place in the future and marvel at the audacity of the feudalism that so luckily predated their existence. The battle was fought out in the open, in front of the whole world, on soup cans and detergent boxes, on every page of every magazine and newspaper. However, most people were oblivious to, if not confused by, the profound political statements that were embedded in the strategic design and placement of the subhead typefaces of their favorite periodicals. But while each faction undesignated the other and poured out limitless streams of body copy to dethrone their adversaries and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were the logical heirs to this precious legacy of overly intellectual page layout, a chasm was forming between themselves and the rest of humanity. It seems that all the while these two sides were bickering, the masses were going along with the rest of their lives. If indeed they did notice something strange about their printed world, it was usually attributed to the approaching millennium (which was expected to be accompanied by political, social and cultural hysteria) and was politely ignored. In the end, everyone who felt the need to be important was recognized as so and everyone else went along with the rest of their lives. The proliferation of sophisticated "tools" amongst the graphically clumsy and ignorant continued to rise, severely diluting the dynamics of the print-media landscape and eventually dissolving the alleged control within the powers that were.

Similar events have occurred late this century in film, music and publishing, where the invention of publicly accessible technologies allowed for the creation of movies, songs and books that would never have been made without them. Graphic Design seems to be scrambling for an explanation of what is going on right now and, unfortunately, the Macintosh is being held responsible for exactly what the Xerox machine did to printing in the eighties. If you look hard enough, you will find that there is some very interesting (and, yes, important) design going on that wasn't simply created by a command-key and doesn't appear to be stuck in any self-referential crisis. "Art for art's sake" rarely makes stars or heroes out of anybody — but it sure cranks out some good work.

BTW - I love the new format. The all-type spreads like pp. 26-27 in *Emigre* 34 are splendid. And as a physical object I think the new size is sexy!

Art Thompson, artless@panix.com (America Online).

customized solutions for various populations. (Who cares where he would publish if he was a designer?) Big government and sweeping legislation that provides one answer for everyone, although considered liberal, are more akin to modernism. Nor is every postmodern designer a liberal — catering to a specific clientèle in a visual language that is tailored to them doesn't always prompt a progressive agenda. An argument can't be won that clearly positions postmodernism as the dominant ideology using the criteria established by modernism. That's what makes postmodernism so scary and elusive; postmodernist theorists dispel the firm footing of modernism for the shifting

MAIL / DIALOG

Dear Emigre, Why is it all the guys have a problem with size? Stop whining, get a life and read!
Hans Huisman, (America Online)

CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

The "Boston Un-Scene" spread from Ray Gun magazine as shown on page 15 in Emigre 34 was designed by Clifford Stoltze and Peter Farrell

ALSO

The quote by Philip Meggs on page 41 in Emigre 34 was taken from the 1st edition of *A History of Graphic Design* which was published in 1983

AND

The article *RADICAL COMMODITIES* by Rudy VanderLans published in Emigre 34 was originally presented as a lecture at the symposium *Modernism + Eclecticism* held in New York City in 1995

[Dear emigre] I just received issue number 34 and must say that I am amazed at the number of people who wrote in to complain not only about the new format but the content as well. I felt compelled to say that I for one do not subscribe to your magazine for the "pretty" pictures but rather for the articles (even if 75% of the people interviewed or writing are totally full of shit). I couldn't care less about what size pages your musings are printed on. I couldn't care less if they are "well designed" or spit out on an ancient typewriter. I only want to read the articles, not look at them. Where is the Jeff Koons of the design world?
P.S. NO MORE DESIGNERS REpublic or Thirst coverage. My throat hurts from defending them.
[Regards] Steven Cooley (America Online)

multiple possibilities of post modernism, and so there is no one overriding argument by which to dispel modernism. (In her 1992 article *ON OVERCOMING MODERNISM*, Lorraine Wild concludes that we know modernism is dead but we don't know what lies ahead.) Mr. Keedy chimes in as well (p.38), speaking of the "vibrant but uncertain postmodern future." Perhaps that is why it's so tempting to use the stable of modernist criteria for all criticism; it was so nice and clean when there was only one answer.

However, to win the "Zombie Modernism" debate, Mr. Keedy needs to move the arena. The fight doesn't belong in the realms of art history or politics specifically; but rather, in a theoretical space that addresses larger issues. Of course, Mr. Keedy's article might then end up reading less about design and more about the "reality" that makes up our boundary-less postmodern world. To that I would say to Mr. Keedy the best defense against the "Zombie Modernist" is a good offense.

SUSAN AGRE WATERMAN
Loyola University Chicago, Illinois.

Frightening

[DEAR EMIGRE] Wow, what a bunch of whiny, threatened brats. You know, I've subscribed to Emigre for a number of years and, frankly, I just don't care how big it is. It will now fit more easily on my bookshelf and better in my bag. Publishing magazines costs mondo money — I'm just glad Emigre is still here. Even more astounding and disappointing is this crazed, frightened, deer-eyes-in-the-headlights response from a number of letter writers to any move toward considering graphic design in relation to critical theory, post-structuralism, social theory or anything else for that matter.

I'm not a graphic designer, I'm a sculptor. I read Emigre (as do other artists) because I'm interested in how ideas interface and manifest in visual forms — especially visual forms that permeate every aspect of society (like, say, advertising...which, by the way, team, is most of what graphic design is). I'm also interested in decoding and recoding those machinations

Suggestions such as "A worthy critical analysis can survive on its own merits, without relying on external justification..." are fairly astonishing to me. Perhaps graphic design and (some) graphic designers are just hitting upon the idea that their work does not exist in some neutral/neutered aesthetic space, but it seems to me frightening that (I'm quite sure) intelligent, educated persons would be so non-reflective of their own field — and why are they reading Emigre anyway?

Where do those standards and norms come from that form the basis for such a "worthy critical analysis"? Are the conventions (and they are conventions) of graphic design so hammered into one's head as to become completely and utterly invisible? Is it a flaw in graphic design education? Are students taught to produce but not to reflect on or question the mode nor the method of that production?

Critical theory, which I find far from a "dry read," and all those Frenchies (it would be nice, by the way, to see names like Kristeva and Cixous along-side the boys now and then) can provide models for viewing and thinking. If graphic design could, for a moment, be viewed as an investigation into meaning, these models could be used to problematize the norms and to shake the foundations of those existent structures that, from all indications, have become a bit too familiar. I applaud Emigre's role in providing a forum for such thought. Keep Mine Coming!!

Thomas Lail, Albany/Brooklyn, New York (America Online).

P.S.: Thanks, A.B. for the lead on the heads.

[Dear emigre] I took issue 34 to the beach, and read the whole thing. I really like the criticism in emigre, but at the same time I would like to see the occasional return to the days of looking at certain designers' work. Much as the postmodernists need a place to express their theories and manifestoes, we also need to see the works of our contemporaries. Chris Macregor, penultimate (America Online)

Dear Emigre,
Well, this time I made it two-thirds of the way through Jeffery Keedy's latest essay and halfway through Lorraine Wild's latest letter (both in #34) before nodding off. Perhaps Ms. Wild, Mr. Keedy and their friends liken their intellectual efforts to urinating upon the stage of the Cabaret Voltaire, but each well-documented pissing match with Mr. Heller et al

[Dear Emigre] I second Lorraine Wild's hope that "Emigre's shrinking page size will inspire more rigorous editing and spare us this useless 'discourse'," and wonder, having just completed reading #34, whether your new page size is, in fact, small enough. [best regards] Michael Bierut, New York City, New York

has served to add yet more members to a third party in this dispute: those who continue to purchase Emigre because it deserves to be supported, but who have come to appreciate it as a can't-fail sleeping aid, unsurpassed even by continuing coverage of the Simpson trial.

The only interesting issue remaining in this debate is who will allow whom to have the last word. One bitter, defensive dispatch begets another and very little, if any, progress is made towards anything new. For example: to punctuate a rambling and decidedly not short-winded argument linking modernism with neoconservative politics, Mr. Keedy posits modernism as the ideological choice of Newt Gingrich and Rush Limbaugh, were they designers; ironically, this kind of wit-preening reminds me of Mr. Limbaugh himself, who will similarly tie a string between disparate points just to show us the pretty bow he's made. I am more interested in hearing how Mr. Keedy (and Ms. Wild, and their friends) feel that their new tools can be applied to undermining neo-conservatism and religious fundamentalism, to removing the elite stigmas associated with knowledge, to helping more of us get along. This is an honest inquiry. I am not trying to be clever or ironic; I accept the social failure of modernism, and have no real allegiances towards either position. But if there is nothing practical to be gained, if movement toward social, political and/or religious change are not at the root of this three year bickering — if the parties involved are interested only in fiddling while Rome burns — then I don't want to hear any more about it, or from them.

There: I have written a letter without using the words "discourse" or "paradigm" so you can use them somewhere else.

Very truly yours,

ADAM BRONSON McISAAC

Portland, Oregon.

Hey Emigre, What's the scoop here? Not "radical commodities," though you have the voice of authority & are a helluva seer. Not Mr. Keedy's voice, though he wins the living language award: ZOMBIE MODERNISTS...that's really funny isn't it, how it carries so much truth?

MAIL / DIALOG

Gee The 20th Century's almost dead. Niggle naggie about modern, postmodern, deconstruction, diversity & some kid with a reed in his mouth dreams of something not yet named. Fuck the past. Wherever has anyone read heavy dudes like emigres rapping heavy rap while worrying will I get back (to that article seen just under where you're reading) and should I go on & go on & see where s it taking me? Your new layouts are the real scoop. Here is vision. The serial nonlinear trip through space. I really dig it.
Sloy, Salem, Oregon.

Can't-fail sleeping aid

Dear Emigre, Ouch. My very first issue of Emigre ever was the first in the new format. (I guess that's what I get for procrastinating my subscription.) While I loved the larger size, I understand that costs and profitability drive many decisions. But did you have to make it 8.5 x 11-ish?

As a designer of annual reports I've come to realize that an odd size, be it larger or smaller, adds interest. Was it an option to make Emigre smaller than 8.5 x 11? Please let me know.

Thanks,

JRab68, Atlanta, Georgia (America Online)

Typo-cool

[DEAR EMIGRE] I have been reading Emigre for over five years now, and in that time have reveled in the typo-excitement you generated. However, I have also seen a considerable shift in the publication from style/design to content. Is this really such a good thing? Your publication is, after all, aimed at the visually led among us, those who look at a book with one eye on the design and one on the content.

I bought the issues previous to your size and "design theory" revamp through a continued fascination with how featured designers' work was integrated with and isolated from your own. This intriguing juxtapositional design style made Emigre a compelling eye-fest.

The continual typeface evolution that you charter/ed and contribute/d to was another reason for picking up a new issue. Even if the articles did not appeal instantly through content, the design either suckered you into reading them (tricky chap that you are), or gave you something else to involve yourself in.

This design/content mix worked well; often by becoming intrigued with the novel layout, one was, before realizing it, reading the text. Bravo. The format change seems to — as you indicated in your "sorry, but..." — have also changed your perception of what Emigre should be. Oh, and as for the: "If this is not what you expected, it's a good thing" bit, Emigre was exceptional due to all of the above and the fact that it was not a polite A4-ish booklet. It was a cumbersome, portfoliosque document that enabled you to showcase designers and your own thing, with space and size that did not render the work postage stamp size (see type specimens in the article [RADICAL COMMODITIES](#)).

Taking the supposed intellectual escalator to design criticism, without bringing the design-based luggage, has actually made Emigre's rebirth rather dull. I know it's one way of being typo-cool by being small and simple with a twist, but what has happened to the typographic song of joy, innovation and enthusiasm past issues sung at such volume. Modula, The Remix?! Type's not dead yet, not on pulp nor pixel. So why begin releasing Emigre's greatest hits?

"Emigre? Oh, it's not as good as it used to be. Too wordy," said a colleague of mine. Sad, but true. Emigre is still a mildly refreshing bath, but not the power shower it used to be. Eye covers the intellectual design theory/criticism very well, looking far afield to matters rarely traditionally covered in such publications. I suspect Emigre aspires to these provocative/stimulating critical heights. However, you excelled in the visual; you really shouldn't give that valuable attribute up, merely to appeal to the typo-pen pockets. Now, it is yours, so do what you will. But it seems an awful pity to leave behind what was never meant to be in the lost and found.

Simon Manchipp, just off Oxford Circus, London, England.

Dear Emigre,

Nice job on issue 34. The diversity of the writers you managed to bring together are a breath of fresh air for discussing the rather confusing terrain of modernism, postmodernism, radical modernism, zombie modernism, etc. The concept of a book review issue struck me at first as an odd way of structuring an entire issue of a magazine, but I must admit that you have convinced me of its therapeutic benefits. Particularly gratifying to read was Mr. Keedy's polemical response. I was glad that Keedy footnoted Louis Menand's essay *THE TRASHING OF PROFESSIONALISM* (p.37), which discusses the anti-elitist, anti-professional rhetoric cir-

[dear emigre] I loved your essay on commodification, publishing and the avant-garde. As someone who appreciates the recent changes in design without fully embracing them, I can't help but feel that you are right. If the avant-garde simply plays out a role as "fringe innovators," without hope of influencing the mainstream, they are reduced to mascots. [thanks] Kevin Felton (America online)

culating around Gingrichian political circles. All of this leads me to respond to Pat Watson's letter that critiques my article, In and Around in *Emigre* 32, as well as some other issues regarding design writing of late...

Mr. Watson wrongly assumes that my role as a critic is to whip the troops into a frenzy with an impassioned call for action but rightly observes that my goal is to make designers "ponder" their role in cultural representation. I'll take critical thinking over bumper sticker politics any day. "My" observations of how white men seem to be fascinated with how other people respond to their technology, a thought Watson finds "mundane," is not mine but belongs to anthropologist Michael Taussig (see bothersome footnote 6). Additionally, the continuing legacy of colonialism is hardly mundane or trivial to me or to the subjects of such spectacles. My use of Ien Ang's study of the t.v. show *Dallas* was not for the revelation that some people viewed it ironically but, as it says in the footnote: "Ang's work is important because she examines how pleasure is produced through consumption, in complex ways with contradictory value systems, rather than seeing consumption as simply an end in itself." I also use Ang's conclusions to support some of my ideas (see pesky footnote 9) about the pleasures of fantasy.

Just when I think I have answered Mr. Watson's charges, I discover that the real problem is with my bibliography.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Dear Emigre, Your last issue (#34) was the site of a small but important breakthrough in design writing and design history writing

I want to commend Andrew Blauvelt and Victor Margolin for stating explicitly and in print (as opposed to oblique reference in design world chat) that April Greiman and Dan Friedman were married

MAIL / DIALOG

What's the big deal? Least important is the simple fact, though interesting, especially for those who did not know. More important are two things: one, the acknowledgement that personal relationships may affect professional work, and that this is worth writing about; and two, that this relationship and implied effect have been presented in a discussion of the work of a male designer

Thank you

Martha Scotford, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina

Dear Emigre, *Emigre* 34. Too many words. Not enough type!

Matthew Klein, New York City, New York

[DEAR EMIGRE] I feel compelled to write in response to the article written by Mr. Keedy in *Emigre* 34 entitled *ZOMBIE MODERNISM IT LIVES!* This was the most immature and ridiculous article I have read by someone professing to be an academic. In no other field of study would an article of such shallow thought, and obvious emotional involvement on the part of the author, be taken seriously, let alone published. He made numerous amazing assertions providing either no evidence or the flimsiest possible anecdotal evidence to back his arguments up. Even his authoritative position as an academic was compromised by his inability to remain objective and concentrate on the ideas being considered. His arguments consisted mostly of cheap personal insults heaped on those that might disagree with him, and wild, impossible leaps of logic most laughable of which is his attempt to tie American politics to design theory in an absolute way.

He claims that liberals are postmodernists and conservatives are modernists (his ranting left little doubt of his own predictable agenda) even using popular conservative figures as proof of his theory. To attempt to tie current American political opinions with other fields of endeavor or study is ludicrous. Our political terminology (right, left, conservative, liberal) are very fluid terms that don't translate to other countries or even history. To claim that someone who believes in smaller government or tougher penalties for criminals also believes that form should follow function and believes that decoration should be sacrificed for simplicity or any other modernist principle is an impossibility. Many people change their political opinions frequently and I suspect designers do too. There is no way a person's design preferences can be predicted by her politics. I can't even predict what my own clients will like by how they look and dress. I am constantly surprised by some accountant who wants an MTV-looking annual report, while my art professor client insists on pure modernism.

One example Keedy used was to claim that Rush Limbaugh, a popular conservative figure, is obviously a modernist by virtue of his conservative political opinions. I have a printer rep friend who is a huge Rush fan and who has been sporting ties from the Rush Limbaugh collection. These ties (designed under the direction, and approval of Mr. Limbaugh) are definitely postmodernist. They are extremely bright with several patterns working together on the tie, and other patterns layered on top created by gloss differences in the fabric of the tie (Hmmm, layering, maybe the designers have a copy of the Cranbrook manifesto). The tie itself is a decidedly postmodern object. It no longer serves any practical function other than decoration. In fact anyone who wears a tie should be considered a postmodernist, or they could hardly justify the excess.

Mr. Keedy should relax. Modernism is long dead. There are books written on the subject but the reason for its demise can be expressed in one word: Boredom. Modernism is boring. People like variety. People are fickle. Look at me; I used to think that the Cranbrook, CalArts style was cool, but now I think it's boring. And all that modernist revival stuff looks pretty fresh. The modernist revival will last a couple of years until something else comes along. Postmodernism is also dead. There is nothing there without modernism to rebel against. It's time to think of some new movement that will inevitably fail and we will have a post-something movement to entertain ourselves with.

Brant Day, Director of Design, Corporate Reports Inc., Atlanta, Georgia.

It seems "my" French intellectuals should be replaced by "his," as if trading Derrida for Sartre makes any sense. It seems as if Mr. Watson was forced to endure the words of many of the poststructuralist writers whom I quote in some earlier academic career as an artist (perhaps at the CCAC coffee bar). Mr. Watson will be pleased to know that I have read the art critics he so desperately wants me to. Unfortunately, they had nothing to contribute to my essay on design.

But wait! It seems that I did have something interesting to say after all, but I did it in such a long, dry, academic way with all of those bothersome footnotes — why have proof when you can just make assertions? Contrary to popular opinion, footnotes are used to acknowledge ideas that you are somehow indebted to and are not there to intimidate readers but to give them places to go to for further information. Relying on footnotes and other sources doesn't mean that you [the author] know it all, but rather shows what you don't know. Requests by editors of design publications to write without footnotes or quotations buy into romantic myths of intellectual independence and authorial self-reliance and perpetuates the rather delusional notion that graphic design is well off on its own and doesn't need to be bothered by the ideas of outsiders. Of course it's easier to write without footnotes or quotes, but that's not the point. The point is to prove what you say, acknowledge what you borrow and to leave open options for interested readers. Of course there is the potential of using too many quotes and footnotes — wouldn't that be a problem for graphic design criticism! Watson's comments make much more sense when I get to the end and discover that he is an "Artist/Designer, Graphic Design Instructor, and Part-time Propeller Head." Anti-elitist rhetoric is often propagated by those who are indentured to the academic system they are so eager to trash, but in whose name and authority they sign. Rather than take style pointers from the likes of Camille Paglia, I'd rather continue with my "dry, academic wanderings" — which prove to be just annoying enough to get a response out of "common man" posers like Mr. Professor Watson.

Academically yours,

ANDREW BLAUVELT

Associate Professor, North Carolina State University, Raleigh.

Duff theory

Dear Emigre, The idea that design is being reborn

(no 34) may be pushing it a bit, though pages that carry three voices talking at once do suggest that something is busting to get out

To start with a very specific example, mentioned in the top portion of page 23: the utopian alphabets (of them, only Futura was turned into a typeface) of the 1920s in Central Europe had life in that particular historical context. To revive these alphabets now is, I think, sentimental. Adding characters to Tschichold's pared down phonetic alphabet, such as "c," "ß," "y," and "z," contradicts the basis of that experiment. We end up with no more than a pretty set of forms

I'm glad that Louise Sandhaus and Anne Burdick do see (page 54, note 5) that I "straddle both sides of the modernist/post-modernist fence." That is intentional. It might be called a dialectical approach. This way of thinking has, I know, been thoroughly slagged off by post-structuralists as exclusionary, probably essentialist too. But to me, it still seems a good principle: thinking on both feet, on the move, resisting monoliths. So, specificity and dialectics, rather than setting up huge abstract opponents ("authority," "control"), as easy targets. And, as Sandhaus and Burdick notice later in that sentence, my

pamphlet *Fellow readers* tries to be an open text giving readers places from which to think about what I say, and to take issue with it. Their voyage down my stream of consciousness was just what I hoped for. I'm glad, too, that you can publish long, digressive and occasionally sharp accounts of publications that criticize things you have helped to promote

One thought I had when writing the pamphlet was this: designers will always do what they want — that's OK, maybe the client is happy, and other people too — but at least they might be persuaded not to wrap themselves up in bad theory when explaining their work. About modern, postmodern, and all that. Of course, if we have to categorize our present age, then we are living in "postmodernity." I've felt that since 1973, the time of the OPEC oil price rise, when everyday life in the comfortable modernizing West seemed to have its basic assumptions put into doubt. But this "postmodernity" just gives us the context in which we live, and it doesn't lead to any particular formal or stylistic conclusion. What we then do in design isn't obvious, we have to think and feel it out. Countries and cultures go at different paces, and provide their own sets of circumstances. As some readers here in the UK have understood, my pamphlet has some specific local resonances. If you are living in a state, a monarchy in fundamental respects unreformed since the seventeenth century, in one part of which there is a nation (Scotland)

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

How hollow

[DEAR EMIGRE] A writer I am not, and have started many a letter only to crumple it in frustration. Frustrated in not knowing how to express myself in words, self-conscious in espousing my own beliefs on design, but compelled to write in response to the insight *Emigre* consistently provides me. After all, who am I? A young, "professional" designer who cranks out POP displays, sell sheets and coupons for a living. Not a famous critic nor a globe trotting design superstar. Just an individual who has passion for design, or at least for the concept of what I think design could be.

Your article, *RADICAL COMMODITIES*, really rang true for me. And my excitement overshadowed any writer's block. *Emigre* #34 not only gave me confidence to write you, but more importantly, it gave me hope. The more I travel down the path of the "professional" designer, the more disillusioned I become. I live a double life, designing for myself at night and on weekends, trying to blow out the cobwebs that corporate design leaves in my mind.

I aspire to do "good design" for the corporate clients who pay my rent, bills and who support my other design life. But I really don't know what "good" is anymore. All I know is that what I do at work is far less satisfying than what I do on my own.

I realize the answer is to become like you, supporting myself, doing my own thing. Designer-owned and initiated projects, like *Emigre*, are why design is exciting to me. Designers realizing that their visions and ideas have value, no matter what a client might think, is very empowering. It is this "rebirth" in design that is breathing life into our profession — a profession that has been on life-support for some time.

Your publication has always reaffirmed my beliefs that new markets for design can be created and co-exist alongside its traditional ones. Design as the subservient vehicle for corporate messages is so very depressing; no matter how much "style" a designer puts into a client's piece, it still is someone else's product that is being sold, someone else's vision. It is products such as fonts, publications, etc., initiated and owned by designers, that continue to revitalize design. But self-expressive design is demonized, seen as a threat to the constrictive definition Graphic Design has been burdened with for many years.

Well, thankfully, the old definition is being challenged. There is an abundance of self-expressive design work out there today, existing primarily underground. As a designer and design addict, I am constantly looking for this type of work. The problem is that much of the really experimental work doesn't reach an audience because distribution channels for self-expressive design work are virtually non-existent.

This is not to say that I think all design should become self-expressive. But I do believe the definition of design should be flexible enough to encompass all forms and that new markets for design should be explored. Think of how frustrating it would be if the only work a musician could get was to record a dog food jingle, or to turn a Clash tune into an elevator-friendly melody. My experience as a "professional" designer has been just that frustrating. Muzak for the masses. I've created coupons that old ladies clip off danish boxes. How hollow. I don't know anything about that woman, what she likes, or whether it matters to her if I use Times or Helvetica. No matter how pretty I make it look, how well it's balanced or how well it's kerned, it's still a coupon. She will either buy the pastry or not.

It was very enlightening to see you address entrepreneurial success achieved by creative people who chose music as an outlet for their energies, and I know there are just as many creative people out there whose passion is Graphic Design. Long live the renaissance!

Matt Fey, Chicago, Illinois.

denied the self-determination it wants, and where in another part (Northern Ireland) there has been, until the recent ceasefire, twenty-five years of armed insurgency, fueled by a mix of religious sectarianism, economic deprivation, and post-imperial feedback - well then, your attitude to "enlightenment values" must be other than what it will be if you live in California, or in Limburg, come to that. (You should know that Maastricht [Capitol] of the Dutch province Limburg], site of an agreement of the European-Union countries, has come to signify socialist-rationalist subjugation in the minds of many English political conservatives.) When those of us who want to change this state of affairs in the UK hear the word "modern," we may think: change, hope, emancipation.

Another very specific point. When I and one or two fellow students at Reading University first (in the 1970s) came across the "crystal goblet" theory, we laughed. Children of 1968, we knew that that there was no such thing as neutrality or unmediated communication. But the "crystal goblet" doesn't want neutrality, it wants gentle upscale refinement. The term itself reeks of the social snobbery of its time (1932), and more particularly, of the particular aspirations of its inventor, Beatrice Warde, a New Yorker in love with good old England and all its ways. I've been amazed at how this duff theory has been revived by designers and theorists in need of something to knock down, to give their own stuff an iconoclastic glow. So here it is, yet again, in the piece by Sandhaus and Burdick (page 56). I'm said to have been making crystal goblets in the design of my pamphlet. Goblets with ragged right edges? Huh!

By the way, I don't think that Stanley Morison had much to do with Monotype Ehrhardt (page 56). Those of us who

have long disliked the authoritarian presence of Morison are gathering support. Look out for Gerrit Noordzij's acid review of Morison's posthumously published *Italian Writing Books* in the Dutch journal *Quaerendo*, and Mike Parker's "true story" of the design of Times Roman in *Printing History*.

While we're on the subject of attacks: I will do a swap with the critics who have faulted me (when you hear the word "incorrect" [page 61] you know you're dealing with a faith) for writing that post-structuralism takes meaning to be arbitrary. I will at last read Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (but I would still rather read Gerrit Noordzij on "writing"), if they get through the following short reading list:

Raymond Tallis, *Not Saussure. A Critique of Post Saussurean Literary Theory* (1988), Christopher Norris, *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War* (1992), Russell Berman, *TROPING TO PRETORIA*, *Telos*, no.85, 1990

Finally, about Jeffery Keedy's text: well, it can look after itself. Now back to work.

Regards,

Robin Kinross, London, England

Write, vent, reply, etc.

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[Dear emigre] being a long-time fan, I hate to say anything negative about *emigre*, but I'll go on the record as one of many disappointed with the new format. As with the compact disc, the new format is perhaps more functional, but as an object, not nearly as desirable as a well-designed LP. I'd pay three times as much to see what you would do with the old format in full-color. [best regards] Clifford Stoltze, Stoltze Design, Boston, MA

All was well

[DEAR EMIGRE] When number 33 dropped through my letter box and I saw that familiar white envelope, I immediately presumed that it was another font catalog or a collection of posters. Much to my surprise, it turned out to be *Emigre* no. 33. The "No Small Issue" previously announced in no. 32 suddenly clicked into place and on closer inspection all was well.

I like the new format for several reasons, although I was surprised about how conventional it seemed. The inside front cover was a start, but more experimentation around this format would be nice, although I realize that it may not be possible on your budget.

I like the way that it is smaller and thicker. This gives it, in my opinion, more the appeal of a paperback book than a magazine. I do not know if this was your intention or not, but it will certainly increase its shelf life.

I would agree with your comments about lengthy articles in the old format. With such a large column width, it was easy to lose your place in the mass of gray text, making it difficult to read.

The content was excellent, especially the essay by Dave Wofford, which reminded me of my own design education.

Yours sincerely,

Ian Styles, Lancs, England.

There is a commonly held belief that information stored in linguistic form is basically fungible; that is, the "message" in a general sense is not substantially altered by changing the written form it takes. A statement rendered in manuscript hand, in letterpress type, or in typewritten or electronic script can essentially contain the same linguistic message. But this belief ignores the obvious fact that the material form in which written language appears is a part of that message. The "information" quotient of the material can vary from negligible to highly significant. A handwritten grocery list and a typewritten one will probably result in the same items being bought, while a handwritten stop sign has a completely different status from an officially produced and sanctioned one.

The fungible character of writing is transforming dramatically in the age of electronic media. For the first time, the encoding of a linguistic message into writing does not have any material stability. It's true that texts were always fungible—there was always a moment in which texts slipped from one form to another, from manuscript to print, from one edition to the next. And there was a moment of suspended existence when the language was held outside of written material form in the mind of any fresh compositor. But the actual documents had a material character: a sentence rendered in handset Garamond foundry type and printed letterpress would retain that material information as part of its linguistic existence until it was rendered again or transformed. Every written instance of the message would bear within it a whole history of its execution in the codes of the material in which it was embodied. In an electron-

The Future of Writing

in Terms of its Past: The New Fungibility Factor

ic environment, entering a sentence in Garamond, Cloister Black, OCRA, or Monoline Script is in no way a permanent aspect of its existence as information. The keystroke commands, transformed into electronic code, are fungible in a whole new way: the mutability of the form the written language takes is increased radically. There is, simply, no longer any necessary relation between the input form of the message and its output. Stored electronically, the very materiality of written language is fungible. Up until the existence of electronic media, this materiality was part of what allowed it to function culturally—and historically speaking, material was memory. Now memory, in essence, is in a far more dematerialized form.

The questions raised by this transformation can only be posed by sketching out the functions that the written material object has performed in the history of human culture and by considering the effects of this new fungibility upon their operation. Some of these functions are quite apparent: the documentation of historical events, of the lived experience of individuals, communities, and nations; legal functions; sacred and magical ritual performance and so forth. Other functions are more incidental than apparent—to assist in the inscription of identity, to call attention to the changeability of culture or to mark the passage of time. In each of these cases, it is not so much the permanence of writing that allows it to function in such capacities. Rather, it is the fact that written documents record changes made to them because of their material existence—so that alterations, transformations, mutilations, imitations, and forgeries all become part of the vocabulary of a material record.

So, to begin:

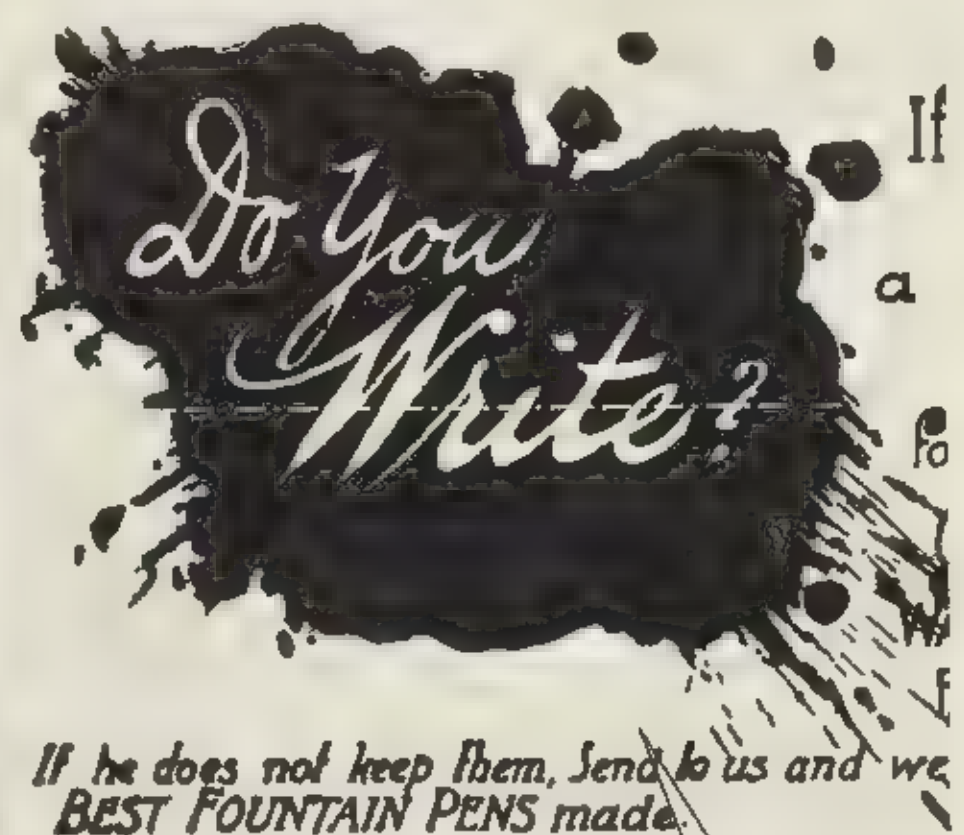
Aa Here we are in a moment of electronic hyper-hype, in the throes of a pre-millennial techno-fascination, on the verge of making virtual everything we never needed in the real, dematerializing experience and making it clean, safe, hygienic, remote. In all of this the future of reading is continually under discussion: proposals for branching, endlessly mutating spaces of hypertext, or scanning the unbounded resources of electronic archives are but a few examples.

Data in electronic form; source unidentified.



Bb But it is with writing that I am concerned and transformations of writing in the electronic environment. Has it changed fundamentally and will it change from the form it took in 1503 when writing was feathered onto the page with consummate skill and grace?

Wood-engraved title page, 1503.

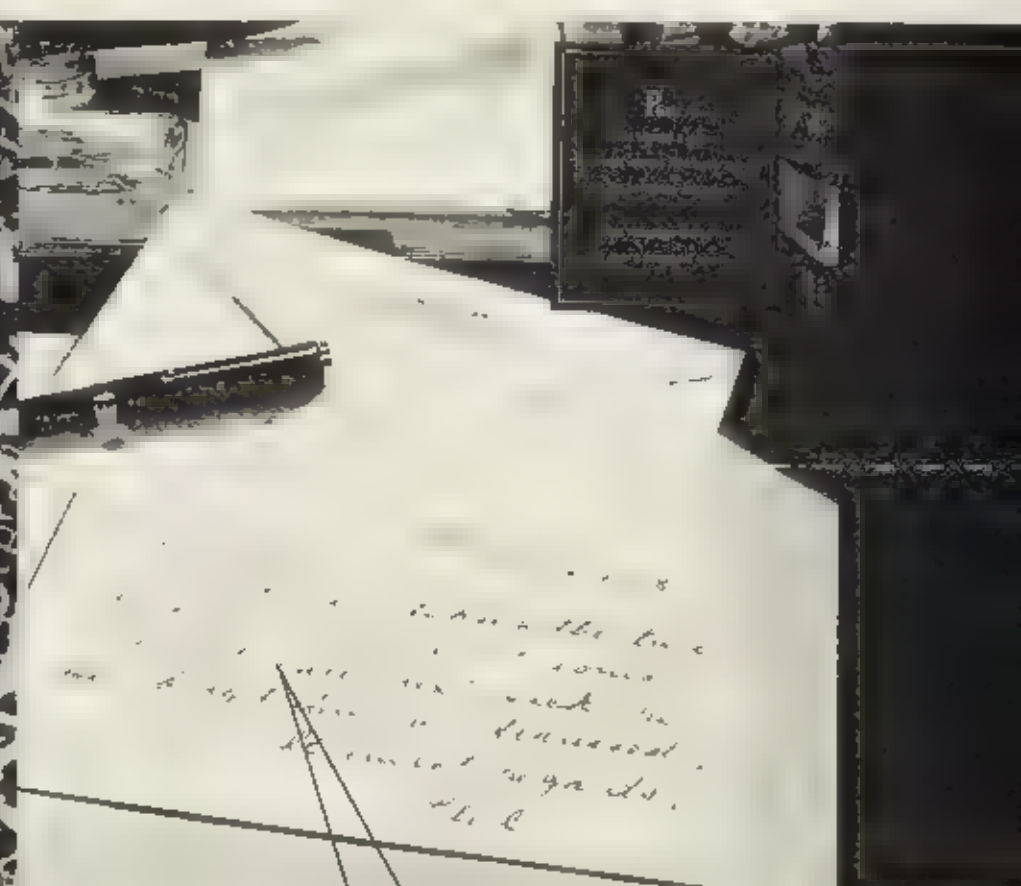


Cc By writing, I am referring to production at the level of the mark, the letter, the sign. I am not interested in spell-checks or writing programs, but in the relation between the cultural function and the new form that writing must take in an electronic medium.

Fountain pen advertisement, 1897; source unidentified.

Dd I am not suggesting that the effects of technology are causal or determinative. As we know, it took several generations for printing types to adapt to the character of metal and lose their relation to calligraphic forms. Similarly, though the technology was in place for all kinds of daring formats and innovations from the moment at which Johann Gutenberg invented moveable type, it was several centuries before the idea of placing type on the diagonal became part of the commonplace graphic vocabulary. Though they were developed for advertising use in the 19th century, such innovations are often associated with the early 20th-century avant-garde and examples such as this cover of the Italian Futurist Filippo Marinetti's 1914 book *Zang Tumb Tumb*. In either case, they represent conceptual, not technical, advances.

Filippo Marinetti, Zang Tumb Tumb, Edizione Futurista, Milan, 1914.



Ee At the most fundamental level, writing is a form of production that involves mark-making of a highly specific kind. It is similar to drawing, but it is constrained because the letters must conform to the codes that give them their functional readability. If overly distorted through individual style or creativity, they lose their communicative power. Writing, therefore, can be defined as a set of marks put at the service of the *symbolic order*, or language. The term *symbolic order* carries many connotations from the psychoanalytic and theoretical context from which it derives: it refers to language as a social code which is shared, rule-bound, capable of inflection, but essentially pre-set. Though it is an external system, language determines the psychic experience through establishing cultural parameters. In fact, my discussion is even more specific here since I am talking about writing and the alphabet. In alphabetic writing (handwriting and its variants), we see the intersection of the cultural symbolic (language) and individual expression coded in material. *Graffiti; source unidentified.*

Ff This recent Crane's ad shows the way in which the personal touch and special sign or mark of individuality is given value in corporate culture. It obviously matters; the handwritten note is something distinct—and here “distinctive.” The sweeping strokes of a bold pen on heavy paper gives “Phil’s” note to “Steve” its charged intimacy. This demonstrates the extent to which any instance of writing has to be understood in relation to the wider field of forms of written production. *Crane's advertisement; New York Times, 1994.*

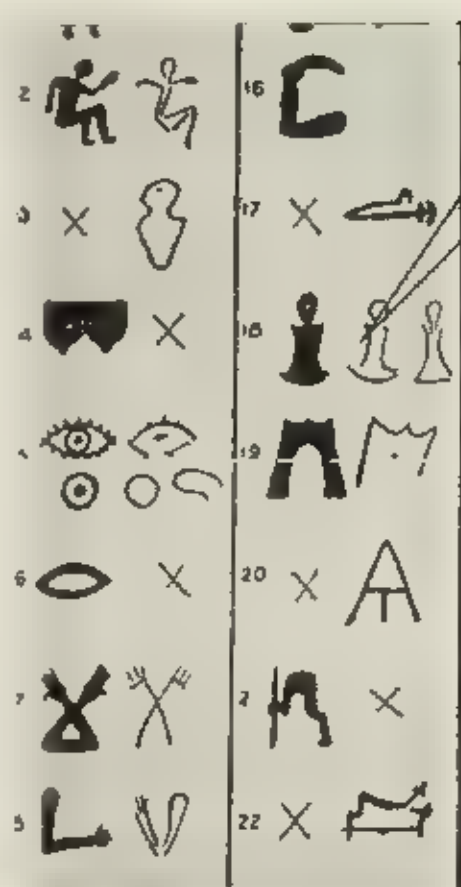
Considering the future of writing involves understanding the way the various forms of writing have functioned in the past.

In the course of human history one can observe how the notion of *wisdom* changes to one of *knowledge* and then of *information*—in each of these writing plays a different part. Wisdom suggests an Old Testament concept of life experience, reflection, contemplation, devotion in which writing serves to reveal Truth (God's word in a religious frame). Knowledge is a modern concept, originating with Renaissance attitudes towards empirical information and evolving into 18th-century Enlightenment rationality; in these, writing serves as authenticating (duplicatable) documentation. Information displaces knowledge in the latter part of the 20th century—and becomes quantified—information is blip, chip, bit, and byte. In such a framework, writing approaches the identity suggested by Jacques Derrida—to act as the means of differentiation. In Derrida's terms, writing is *différance*: the coming-into-being of the conditions for differentiation or *archetrace*. This model of writing is uncannily well matched to an electronic concept of knowledge as information when information functions through the principle of binarism. The questions that immediately arise are, what constitutes the information of writing itself? And will writing at the service of quantified information preserve the informational aspects of material writing, especially with respect to two major areas of cultural activity: history and identity?

It is obvious that the construction of history depends upon the record retained in both material artifacts and documents—castles and their record books, desks and their papers, objects and accounts. The meaning of any particular written record is not merely linguistic. The material support—the stone, clay, cloth, vellum, paper—on which it is recorded provides information about the culture in which it was produced. This is incidental but essential information.

Gg When presented in table form, these glyphs from a Cretan syllabary, produced in Ignace Gelb's work on the history of writing, are available for study as part of a linguistic code. Their individual occurrences, however, would give other indications about the date, place, and conditions of their production because of the rocks, clay, or other materials in which they were produced. The importance of letters or other written marks is not just that they are material in form but that they bear meaning through their form.

Ignace Gelb, *A Study of Writing*, Chicago University Press, 1944.



history



Hh The symbolic value of letterforms has been the subject of long and old debates. One of these focuses on the origin of letters. Are they essential elements of the cosmos gifted with archaic meaning as the Kabbalists believed? Were they written by the finger of God as the keys to divine thought and universal structure, then given to humanity in the tablets handed to Moses on Mt. Sinai?

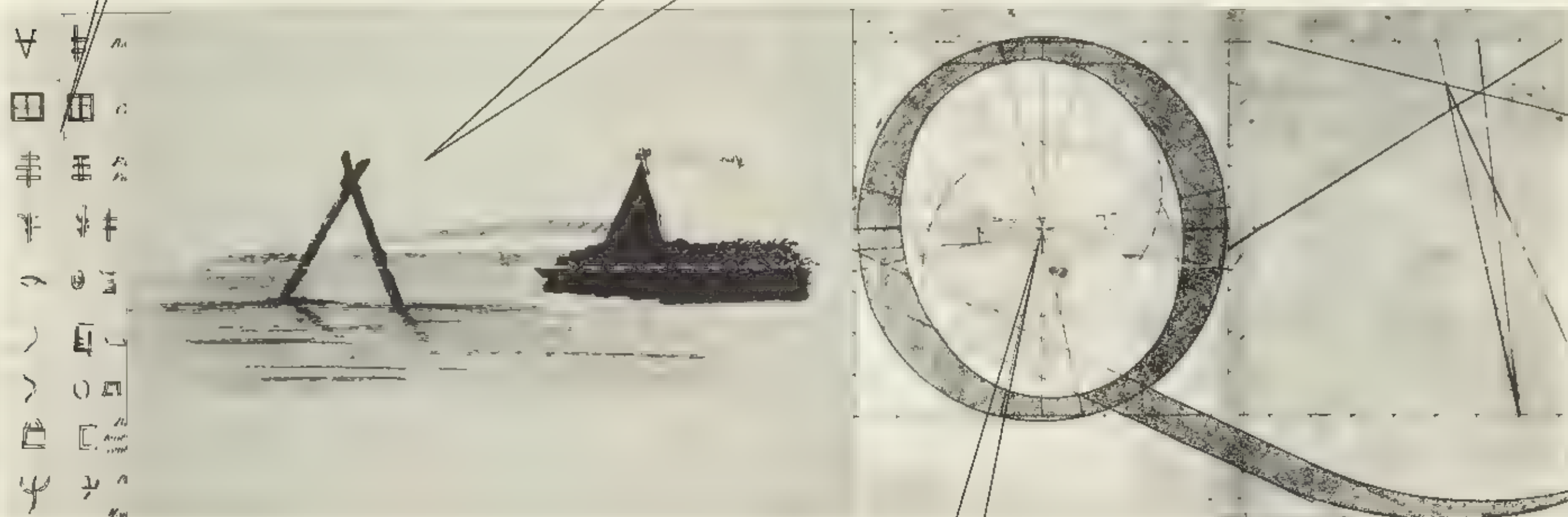
Athanasius Kircher, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, Rome, 1652.

Ii Or were they a human invention scraped together from the impulse to make records of business transactions, historical events and poetic insight? If so, then their early forms were clearly crude, imperfect and only slowly standardized, as the inscription on this Sphinx from around 1700 B.C. would suggest. *Sphinx from the Sinai peninsula with early alphabetic inscription, about 1700 B.C., from John Healy, The Early Alphabet, British Museum Publications, 1990.*

J j Some have attempted to link mythic tales about early civilization—and philosophical proposals about its relative innocence or barbarity—to the origins of alphabetic letterforms. The 18th-century writer Court de Gebelin forced a reading of the alphabet's schematic pictorial form into a correlation with the objects he believed to be the basic elements of a nomadic camp. Gebelin had no archaeological evidence to support his claims—either for the original forms of the letters or for their iconic value.

Court de Gebelin, Le Monde Primitif, Paris, this from the later 1816 edition.

K k The visual form of the alphabet has provoked many imaginative readings over the course of human history. The 18th-century scholar Philip Allwood's assessment of the letter "A," for instance, is that its forms were derived from tent poles used by people who made their life according to a yearly cycle of rising and falling river waters (tee-pees on the Nile?). The cross-bar of the letter marked the important role that the highwater mark played in their lives—and since these cycles had such profound consequences for every other aspect of their existence, this letter naturally came first in the alphabet. *Philip Allwood, Literary Antiquities, London, 1799.*



L l In the Renaissance, attempts to make the letters reflect divine proportions led to elaborate geometric schemes for their construction. This effort combined a search for a mathematical essence in letterforms with a tastefully aesthetic modification of the rigid rules of geometry in order to coax the letters into pleasing sensual forms. Such a value, though mathematical in its fundamentals, was also loaded with symbolic information.

Possibly Luca Pacioli, 1509; uncertain.

Mm In this graphic interpretation of the traditional Pythagorean symbolism accorded to the "Y," Renaissance type designer and printer Geoffrey Tory rendered literal the metaphoric choice posed to a young initiate into the arcane mysteries of the philosophical system. The consequences of the choice between the easy path of worldly life, with its tempting sausages and other delights, and that of the difficult path to the acquisition of knowledge is rendered quite clearly in his 1529 edition of *Champfleury*. Tory also believed, as did many other designers earlier and later, that the two fundamental elements of letters—curves and straights—bore gendered values producing the basic dynamic of a cosmological dualism. *Geoffrey Tory, Champfleury, Paris, 1529.*



FRUGALITY

DEEM

ATMOSP

Nn The richness of information that visual form provides can be seen in the poses, costumes, and moral implications of these 19th-century letters meant to inspire the denizens of the nursery by their models of behavior.

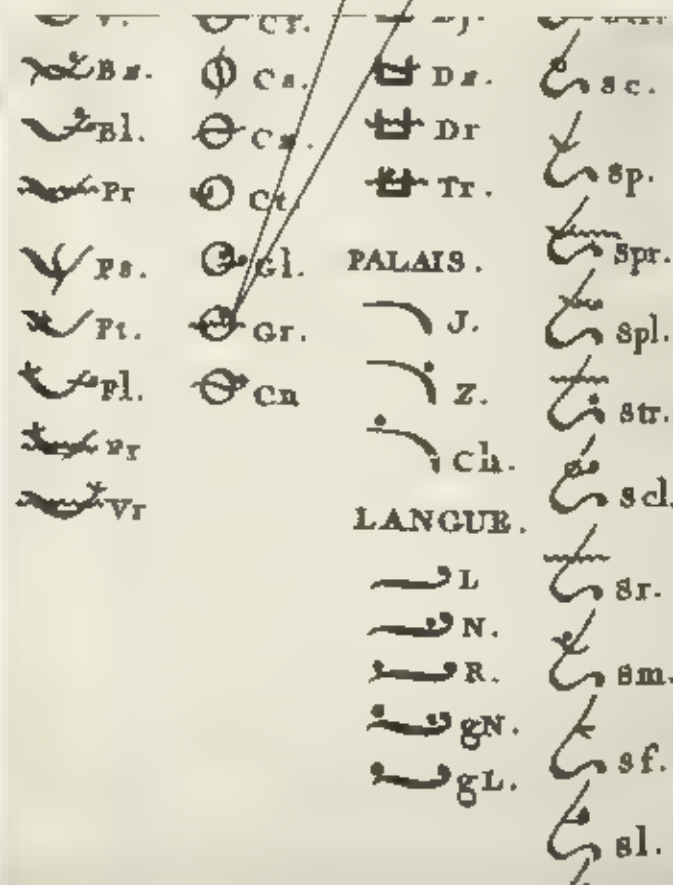
Nursery alphabet, 19th century.

Oo Aside from moral and philosophical issues, other cultural values, such as those ignited by the rise of industrial capitalism, can be seen in the history of letters and their form. This page from 19th-century writing master George Becker, for instance, shows the impact of decorative metal faces on the market value of his calligraphic techniques. Becker had to show that his hand skills could compete with those of the print shop, in extravagant excess. *George Becker, Ornamental Penmanship, 1854.*

Pp Alphabet interpretation that links the letters to the human body represents yet another area in which the symbolic value ascribed to writing carries a cultural function. The concept of a somatic writing is an old one—various linguists and philosophers have proposed a form of writing whose signs would be closely linked either to pronunciation or to immediately apparent meaning. Bishop John Wilkins, an English cleric of the 17th century, proposed a set of glyphs whose forms he derived from studying the positions of the organs of pronunciation in the human mouth and throat. Bishop John Wilkins, *An Essay Towards a Real Character and Philosophical Language*, London, 1668.

Qq President de Brosse, a French 18th-century philosopher, had his own proposals for a phonetic writing system whose notational forms were based on the nose, lips, teeth and tongue. De Brosse was attempting to create a writing that would be a set of instructions for its own pronunciation as well as a record of its articulatory operations.

Charles President De Brosse, *Traité de la formation Mécanique des Langues...*, Paris, 1765.



Rr In this brief description of somatic schemes for letterforms, it would be a mistake to exclude the ingenious observations of J. Marie Moussaoud, who had the clarity of sight to notice that the alphabetic letterforms derived directly from their pronunciation—as is evident (?) from this schematic analysis of the source of the "A" in the positions of both lips and tongue. J. Marie Moussaoud, *L'Alphabet Raisonné*, Paris, 1803.

Ss ...And maybe more convincing in this sketch of the pursed lips required to make a "B." Needless to say, nuances were overlooked in such a scheme—the fact, for instance, that the pronunciation of upper and lower case letters were the same figured not at all into Moussaoud's calculations. J. Marie Moussaoud, *L'Alphabet Raisonné*, Paris, 1803.

T t Inquiry into the forms and values of known and unknown writing systems has even extended beyond the so-called ancient and exotic scripts to include the written language of other members of our solar system. Electronic media can record some of this rich legacy—as in this digitally enhanced letter from the Martian alphabet, taken from a recorded notation made by the medium Hélène Smith in the 1920s. *Digitally enhanced Martian letter, from Otherspace: Martian Typography, Johanna Drucker and Brad Freeman, 1993.*



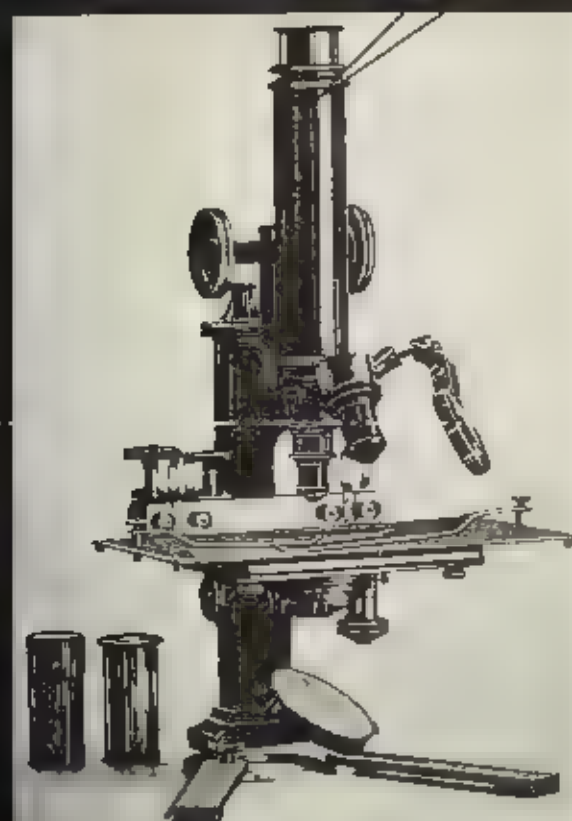
It is obvious from this smattering of examples that a great deal of non-linguistic information is recorded in each of these instances of written language.

This "information" is not the apparent message but the incidental supplement provided by the material form and support. One could examine the inks, papers, printing technologies, economic circumstances of production and consumption, use and status, of each of these documents, as well as the complex cultural discourses of history, religion, philosophy, and psychology in which they participate, on the basis of their material existence. Reduced to mere elements of a static linguistic code, Tory's Pythagorean "Y" or Allwood's "A" would lose most of their resonance.

The functions of writing that serve the interests of power and the production of history depend in large part on writing's material form. The authority of written documents, as I mentioned before, does not depend upon their pristine and unaltered condition. Quite the contrary—it is the capacity of material documents to record change that makes them such believable witnesses. Their very substance is a testimonial since marks, means of writing, and material all change over time.

If the written history becomes increasingly separate from the history in material, will anything be lost? Is the palimpsestic character of the material document something that has an electronic equivalent? Or is the vulnerability of the electronic document so perfect—the capacity for seamless, unmarked alteration so developed that materiality will no longer play an essential role in the assessment of written history?

Uu In the history of forgery, the fortunes of visual forms have risen and fallen over time. The legitimacy of marks in legal testimony resided for centuries in an expert witness's capacity to assert the authenticity of a sample without recourse to any second sample for a comparison. Comparative techniques were only admitted into courtrooms in the United States in the early part of the 20th century. But forgery studies had already become subject to scientificization in the 19th century, when specific equipment for the examination of disputed documents was developed—such as this specialized microscope. The emphasis on evaluating documents shifted to the non-visible measure of muscular patterns—emphasis, weight and gestural movements—which could be analyzed by electronic equipment though they could not be detected by visual comparison. *Photograph of a microscope designed particularly to detect forgeries; source unidentified.*



identity



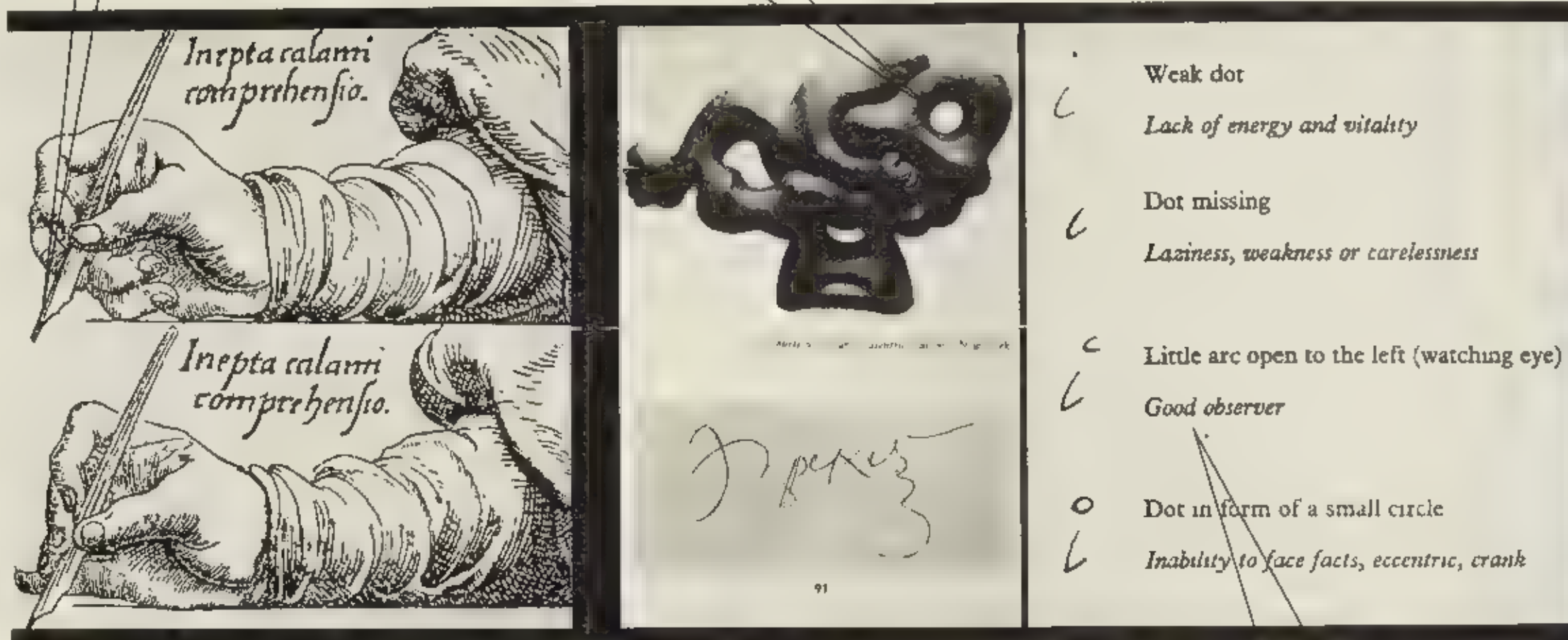
*L'écriture
automatique*

Vv In addition to the role writing plays in history, it also functions significantly in the production of identity as it is understood in late 20th-century western culture. Handwriting serves many functions in this capacity—from the signature as an equivalent to identity to the simple pleasure of mark-making to a complex investment in personality analysis. The poet André Breton's self-portrait shows him engaged in optical manipulations and other aspects of fantasy while the handwritten title "*L'écriture automatique*" ("automatic writing," one of the Surrealists' literary techniques) proclaims the intimate relation of creative production to personal identity. *André Breton, "L'écriture Automatique," self-portrait collage, 1938.*

Ww The cultural critic Theodor Adorno once remarked that the term "alienation" described a world in which there was no place for individual experience—or its record. In that sense, handwriting is directly implicated in the production and recognition of individuality. Handwriting is the capacity of writing to be inflected, transformed by the hand into a form that reflects the mutable, personal, and idiosyncratic image of the symbolic. *Page from the manual of a Renaissance writing master; source unidentified.*

Xx The symbolic order is rule-bound; nonetheless, the act of inscription makes identity visible. One has the senses of becoming, being made, marked in the material process of writing. This is not meant to be a nostalgic observation or agenda—the pleasures of writing take many forms, some of them electronic.

But that doesn't dispense with the fundamental function of writing as an equivalent, expression and embodiment of individuated identity. In the case of this analysis of the handwriting and work of the sculptor Jacques Lipschitz, a graphologist "revealed" the "essence" of Lipschitz through the similarity of forms he used in his signature and his three-dimensional work. Such an analysis subscribes to the idea of an inalterable kernel of human character. *Jacques Lipschitz's handwriting and sculpture, compared; source unidentified.*



Yy There are basically two competing models of identity and writing plays a role in each. In one model, the assumption is that character is fixed, almost like an aspect of genetic combination, in a unique and indelible fingerprint-like pattern in each individual from zygote to death. This is the humanist notion of identity—and handwriting is its revelation. In modified form, this humanist notion takes into account the vicissitudes of fortune (education, class, gender). The opposing model takes individual identity to be the mere coincidence of forces in which a specific intersection of desires, codes, and programmatic attitudes shows up as the mechanistic production of the cultural order. In this model, handwriting serves to inscribe the place the individual occupies in such an order, a place marked and demarcated according to rules, conventions, and constraints. *R.D. Stocker, The Language of Handwriting, New York, 1901.*

With all of this in mind, what does the immateriality of electronic media imply? Not a total loss of identity—surely the capacity of the keyboard to produce or even reproduce a specific handwriting extends the inscription of identity into the electronic mode? But such a simulacral image of character may lack the fundamental pleasure associated with mark-making and the function this serves as a means of being and becoming in the world. Increasing alienation—the resistance of the world to inflection by individual experience—seems like a possibility at every stage of industrial and technological homogenization. The electronic universe is only an increase in quantity, rather than a qualitative transformation in that respect. But in other respects there remains the basic difference—a material difference—between the modes of electronic production and those of conventional pre-electronic media. And that, to return to my original point, is the condition of fungibility—fungibility to an unprecedented degree. Mark-making on the Newton tablet does not result in a trace inscribed in material, but a transformation into the quantifiable terms of an information-based analysis that stores those signs according to pre-set categories. The systematic and pre-ordered, rather than the incidental and serendipitous, are the ruling forces of this new universe. Even if it sounds naive to romanticize touch as the mark of the individual, and to assign to that a set of linked concerns involving existence, identity and history--

the absence of a material relation between inscription and production, the fungibility factor, will most certainly have an effect in those arenas of history and identity in which writing has played such an important part.

In the current phase of techno-consumerism and new media boosterism, the questions arising around electronic media have to be posed in terms of social effects, as well as aesthetic and technological ones. When there is no strict relation between input and output, no strict relation between the forms of labor in production and the format of the object that is produced, then labor risks increasing effacement from the very social processes it facilitates. The social spaces of community and the polis, already seriously disintegrated, risk further disintegration as the activities of production are spatially distinct from the conditions of production. And the focus on the body in the production of written language shifts to issues of interface—the lived experience of life with the machine.

The many functions of history and memory that are supported and served by materiality will inevitably transform as the seamless erasure and mutation of documents becomes a matter of course. When the vanishing trace of inscription is totally gone there will be no means of recovery—the incidental “information” of materiality will have dissolved, leaving only the bare-bones code of a starved linguistic message.

And as for identity—well, I conjure only a single image of the possible future—when a “sim” encounter with a virtual celebrity produces an autographed signature, will anyone take that as “proof” of the event?

This paper is based in large part on a talk given in February 1994 at the “Modernism and Eclecticism” conference at School of Visual Arts in New York City.

Zz The invention of writing was once characterized as the image of Mercury led by love—intelligence led by whimsical desire—as in this frontispiece. In the background are brute savages in desperate need of the civilizing influence of language.

Court de Gebelin, Le Monde

Primitif, Paris, this from the later 1816 edition.



THE TERM 'CLIENT' APPEARS TWENTY-NINE TIMES IN THE TWO-HUNDRED-FORTY-ONE-HUNDRED-SIXTY-SOME WORLD ANTHOLOGY. LOOKING CLOSER. THAT'S A RATIO OF ABOUT EIGHT THOUSAND TO ONE. IF WORDS WERE MILES TO MEET A CLIENT ONE WOULD NEED TO TRAVEL ALL THE WAY TO THE CONTINENT.



**WAYS OF
LOOKING
CLOSER**

Denise Gonzales Crisp

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
Tom Tierney


**Capitalism survives by force
exploits, to define their own in
This was once achieved by ext
the developed countries it is
false standard of what is and**

JOHN BERGER *Ways of Seeing*

LOOKING CLOSER: *Critical Writings*

on Graphic Design represents the first effort to compile the words of design practitioners, educators, curators and critics—fished mostly from the backyard reflecting pool of trade journals, exhibit catalogs and conference lectures—into one authoritative volume. As the first, the editors bear the weight of cataloging history, collecting a range of strokes which together propose to capture The Big Picture of contemporary design criticism and practice.

If the collection brings us a fair sight of a profession and its critical dialogue, it also alerts us to a community's oversights; a faint, unsettling alarm beckons from someplace outside the view.



ing the majority, whom it ex-
erests as narrowly as possible.
ensive deprivation. Today in
being achieved by imposing a
what is not desirable.

I took in the essays like a train passenger feasts on the panorama inching by in the distance, recognizing old shapes in new arrangements, squinting at an occasional jarring glint off a reflective edge. Because most of the original context was erased by the editors, I was able to consume the words and ideas unfettered by contingencies waiting somewhere beyond the book's cheery yellow cover.

The editors eliminated images or typographic expressions which may have framed the original papers, favoring a visual code of solidarity and academic discourse over the clash of argument.

Reminded of a similar title, I searched my dustiest shelves, exhumed John Berger's small book *Ways of Seeing*, and read it again.

If Marxist criticism can romance, Berger is its Valentino. I was seduced once more. And newly troubled. In his analysis of art production, he links commercial art to painting, demonstrating ways in which visual form is used to sustain the power of the ruling class. In short, he brings into focus our cultural landscape as shaped by the forces of capital. Berger's critique demanded a more pointed examination of *Looking Closer's* scenery: Why is a structure as fundamental to design practice as capitalism obscured in this sampling of design criticism?

And why is the client—the foremost representative of capital—all but missing from view?

The essays chosen for this collection look at a range of valuable issues, but they usually occlude one of the most influential. Business and consumption are mentioned at times, but of the forty-eight essays included, few even begin to bring capital's motivating force into critical focus.¹ There are plenty of references to brand names, corporations, magazines—all the institutions designers work for—but their names are invoked to talk about Design and Culture.

Good Design. Multi Culture. Ugly Design. Hack Design. Semiotic Culture. Postmodern Design. Modern Design. Style Culture. I'll grant that books about design should probably talk about design. And that culture is the rage. But clients outline, judge and revise designers' work. They underwrite style and content, form and function. There could have been a section entitled *Clients To Die For* or *I'm Okay, He's the Capitalist* or perhaps more in keeping with contemporary criticism, *The Cultural Logic of Late Clients*. Whether one believes design practice to be dimmed by shadows of economic inequity or bathed in the golden light of opportunity, the culture of design, like our broader culture, exists within capital's borders. Designers live on the same turf as clients.

A teacher of mine once remarked that Marxist criticism is a dead end—there's not much you can do with it in practice. Maybe that's true. Or maybe looking closer at the capitalist organism makes some of us squirm. Maybe we have steeped ourselves in so much culture to diffuse suspicions that we keep company with a brutal giant. Trying to divest unruly capitalism of its power to disrupt the scene, critique of design practice tends to dismiss the client with an icy cold shoulder or regard him with incurious glances. The brute is effectively relegated to a stool in the corner. But with the client exiled, our discourse merely sketches the big picture. Many of the essays found in *Looking Closer*, and design criticism in general, finally project the ersatz quality of a hand-painted backdrop. The effect is reasonably convincing, but only from afar. Perhaps distance insures that designers will not be implicated in the capitalist conspiracy; it certainly frees us from challenging confrontation. Berger distills it in this way:

The idea of innocence faces two ways. By refusing to enter a conspiracy, one remains innocent of that conspiracy. But to remain innocent may also be to remain ignorant. The issue is not between innocence and knowledge...but between a total approach to art which attempts to relate it to every aspect of experience and the esoteric approach of a few specialized experts who are the clerks of the nostalgia of the ruling class in decline.

Though the current political climate makes it difficult to share Berger's optimism about the demise of the ruling class, his statement is useful. When it is applied to design—specifically because, like art, it exists within capitalism—a motive for distancing ourselves from the client begins to emerge.

As writers, designers are the "few specialized experts" who benefit by omitting capital's ferocious presence. The concept of the "hack" and of "illegitimate" design are manifestations of the omission, and they signal an underlying conflict. Berger provides further insight. He writes of oil painting and art here, but I'm taking the liberty of making a few substitutions.



The art of any culture will show a wide differential of talent. But in no other culture is the difference between 'masterpiece' and average work so large as in the tradition of graphic design. In this tradition the difference is not just a question of skill or imagination, but also of morale. The average work...is produced more or less cynically: that is to say the values it is nominally expressing were less meaningful to the designer than the finishing of the commission or the selling of his product. Hack work is not the result of either clumsiness or provincialism; it is the result of the market making more insistent demands than the design. The period of graphic design corresponds with the rise of commercial art markets. And it is in this contradiction between design and market that the explanations must be sought for what amounts to the contrast, the antagonism existing between the exceptional work and the average.

WAYS OF SEEING P.88

My substitutions first exaggerate the obvious: design exists at a crossroads—at the intersection of visual expression and commerce. So does art. But art as an-end-in-itself seems insulated from capital, particularly in the minds of its consumers. Design, by contrast, mucks around in it incessantly, like a pimp working the strip. When measured against artists, graphic designers are hacks.

Which reminds me of a story. I once had a conversation during a dinner party with a provost of a local university. Knowing I'm a graphic designer, she asked "What medium do you work in?" A bit at a loss, I explained that I'm not a "fine artist" but I adopted her premise by adding "I guess you could say my medium is print." I don't know if her opinion of me changed, but I felt uncustomarily apologetic—as if my subconscious had found the switch to a forgotten neon sign, announcing now with flash and buzz: "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I do it for money."

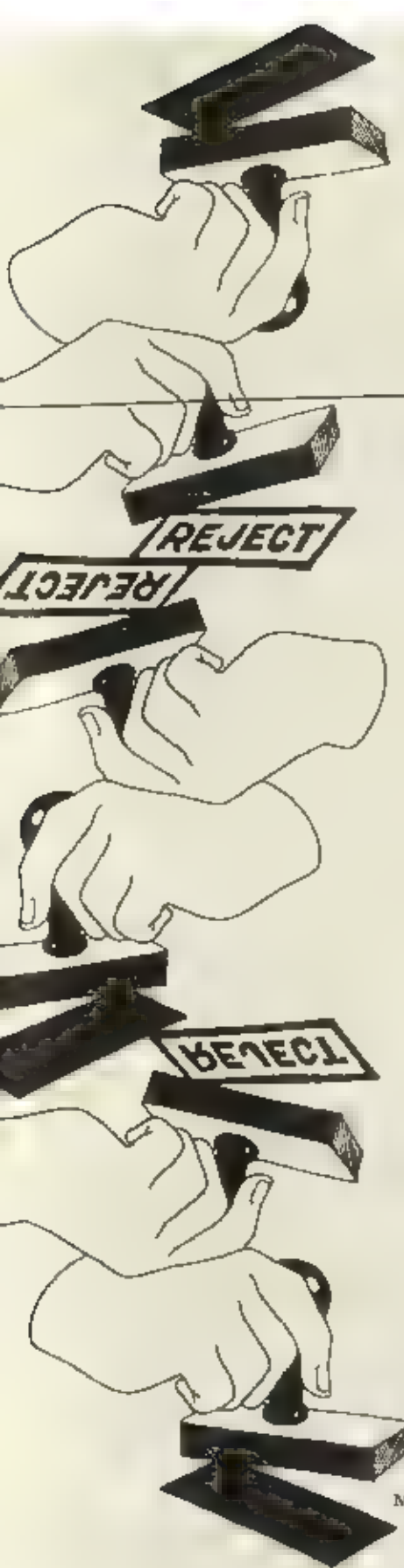
Most people neither understand nor give much thought to design. Art resides in public and private consciousness like some genetically-coded superstition. It descends from above through the gifted and insightful to reveal the secrets and ailments of society. Design, produced by who-knows-who, replicates itself endlessly on undistinguished walls to explain the bus system, or to sell pop. Art expands desire. Design fulfills need.

Or so it seems.

Berger, following the lead of Walter Benjamin, convincingly argues that art garners its status from its detachment from ^{professed} commissioners; by producing one-of-a-kind ^{a body of} work; and through ^{supposed} independent authorship. Art's authenticity and originality are valuable commodities in capital. And they are identifiably deficient in mass-produced, quotidian graphic design. The perceived disparity between the qualities of art and design remains central to a debilitating and confusing analysis of what designers do.

The cultural value of authenticity in art, presenting an original, must translate in design to re-presenting originally.

One-of-a-kind becomes first-of-a-kind. Distance from the patron equals...um, sorry. No translation available.



Dripping in capital, designers are unclean.

Internalizing the rumor that they trespass on the hallowed grounds of art aggravates matters. Design's imposed "duty" to fulfill market and client "need" is suddenly redefined—by artistically inspired designers and writers—to exclude those who do the duty "artlessly."

Many defensively stake their own tentative ground by sniffing at those even more odious than themselves. *Looking Closer* provides many examples where "real" professionals draw the ideological line between their own pure approach and the ones that have degenerated into imitative trends:

The entire process of creating a fully functional font has been democratized, demystified. And as with any democratization there is a parallel increase in competition and mediocrity. We may have to suffer through a lot of useless junk designs or second-rate knockoffs in the near future.

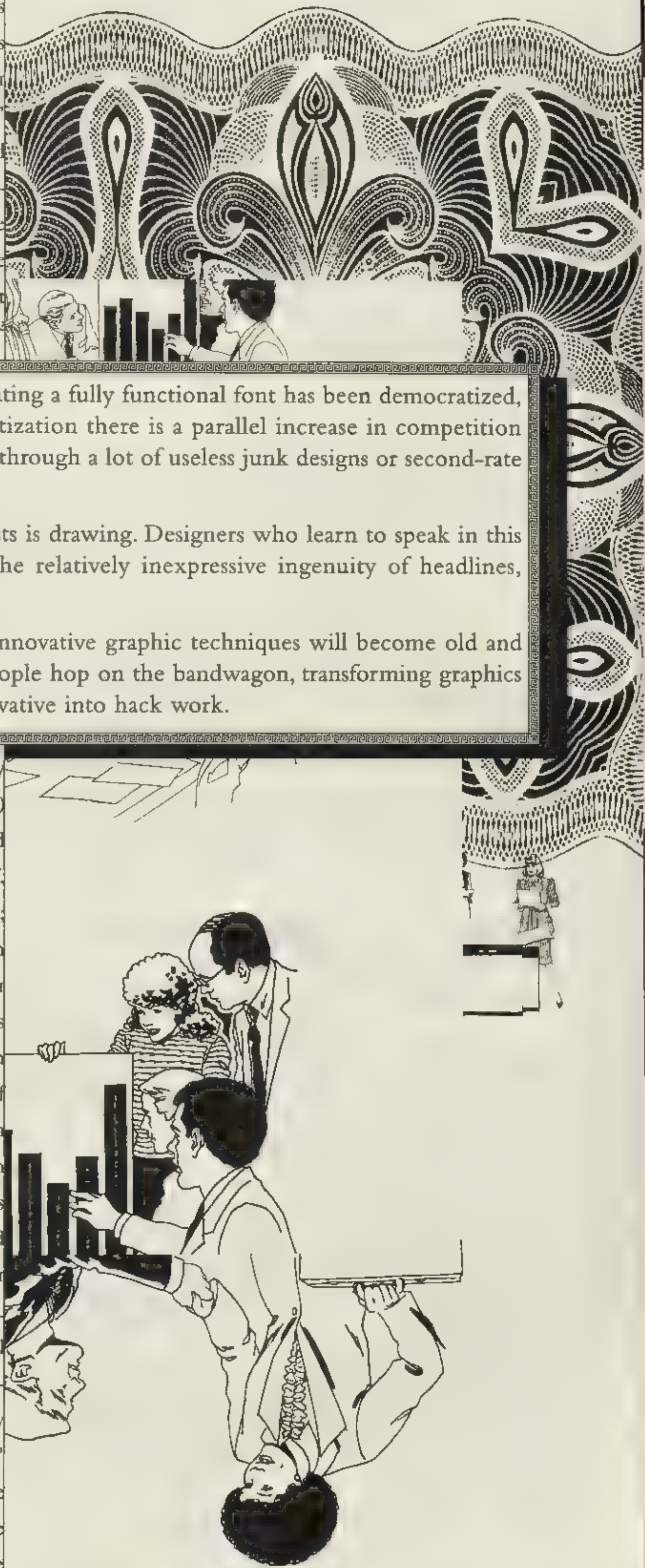
The true language of visual artists is drawing. Designers who learn to speak in this language fluently can move beyond the relatively inexpressive ingenuity of headlines, graphic puns, or style genres.

[The computer's] innovative graphic techniques will become old and tired very rapidly as more and more people hop on the bandwagon, transforming graphics that originally appeared fresh and innovative into hack work.

I guess we are to believe it is possible to consistently stand above the market's (client and consumer) habit of driving salable trends until their battered old wheels fall off.

Let's imagine for a wild moment that capital demands relentless production; that it churns out thousands of products, and then more products, and then even more products after that. And let's just say this plethora of products must continuously make reference to dozens upon dozens of similar products—in a semiotic sort of way. How could we ignore the very lifeblood of a production system that prompts endless variation on limited themes? All producers of visual goods contribute to the make-up of design as a service and a profession, for better, for worse, and for everything in between.

Applying Berger's terms, "The antagonism existing between the exceptional work and the average" feeds the pernicious stratification of our profession. So-called hacks are unwittingly encouraged, even rewarded, by the "insistent demands" of the market. And, like the sting of a cut, these "average" practitioners remind that the honorable values and customs of the "exceptional" are vulnerable to infection. **A capitalistic malady threatens to drag design from the sublime toward the vulgar, a place we have worked hard to escape through "high" design, and now, critical writing.'**



The fact that design suffers from limited historical documentation further frustrates attempts to define current practice. Because graphic design has arguably been underrepresented in art, business and culture, some designers/critics attempt to rewrite—or write for the first time—a history specific to design. Others write clinging uncritically to ideas and ideals drawn from existing history, such as it is. Still others seek guidance in recorded design movements, but temper their writing with lessons taught by contemporary cultural theory in an attempt to compare, understand and direct design's function as a practice and a service today.

John Berger, as well as other cultural critics such as Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard and Michel Foucault, provide the means to decode history, placing culture in its economic context. Applying this insight to design history, some writers in *Looking Closer* recognize that design came of age in the context and service of commerce:

A notable difference is that manifestos of that time often intended to counteract the values of a corrupt bourgeoisie.

I doubt we share those aims now.

ROBERTSON P.64

In the nineteenth century a new design aesthetic came about. This aesthetic grew out of the development of a mass media and of the newly competitive commerce of capitalism.

Meanwhile across the Atlantic, the American marketplace presented a different set of criteria for both the motivation and the evaluation of form making. By the 1930's, design had become an effective tool of commerce and was shaped by the competition of the marketplace and the drive for profit.

BLRDICK P.139

We look through the lens of Pictorial Modernism and we see work. . . . we now think is great. What we don't see is the angry, frightening graphics of a tumultuous era. . . . Through this lens, we see Western European design, and design that was used primarily for selling expensive but tasteful luxury products—design that can be put to those same uses today.

KALMAN, MILLER, JACOBS P 26-27

When discussing current prospects, on the other hand, the focus often blurs, softening the edge of capitalism. Either that, or commerce magically vanishes; opportunity is laid out before us with sweeping gestures toward clear skies:

Design for commerce remains, as ever, concretely mixed with middle and upper class interests. No amount of poetry can coax it from that foundation.

I now believe our most pressing issue in the next decade is not about art versus design but is about reinvesting both with a moral authority and a higher vision.

FRIEDMAN P 55

Environmentalism has been a style before. We've been through that. We've worn our ecology flags on our denim sleeves. Now it's style again.

So maybe the most important thing we can do is figure out a way to use the style of graphic design to make the new environmentalism more than just a style.

JACOBS P.190

Graphic design can be a contribution to our audiences. It can enrich as it informs and communicates. And there is faith in not only the possibility, but the necessity for advancement and growth in our field, an imperative for change. That only through change can we continue to push ahead in knowledge and expertise, theory and expression, continually building our collective knowledge of the process of communication

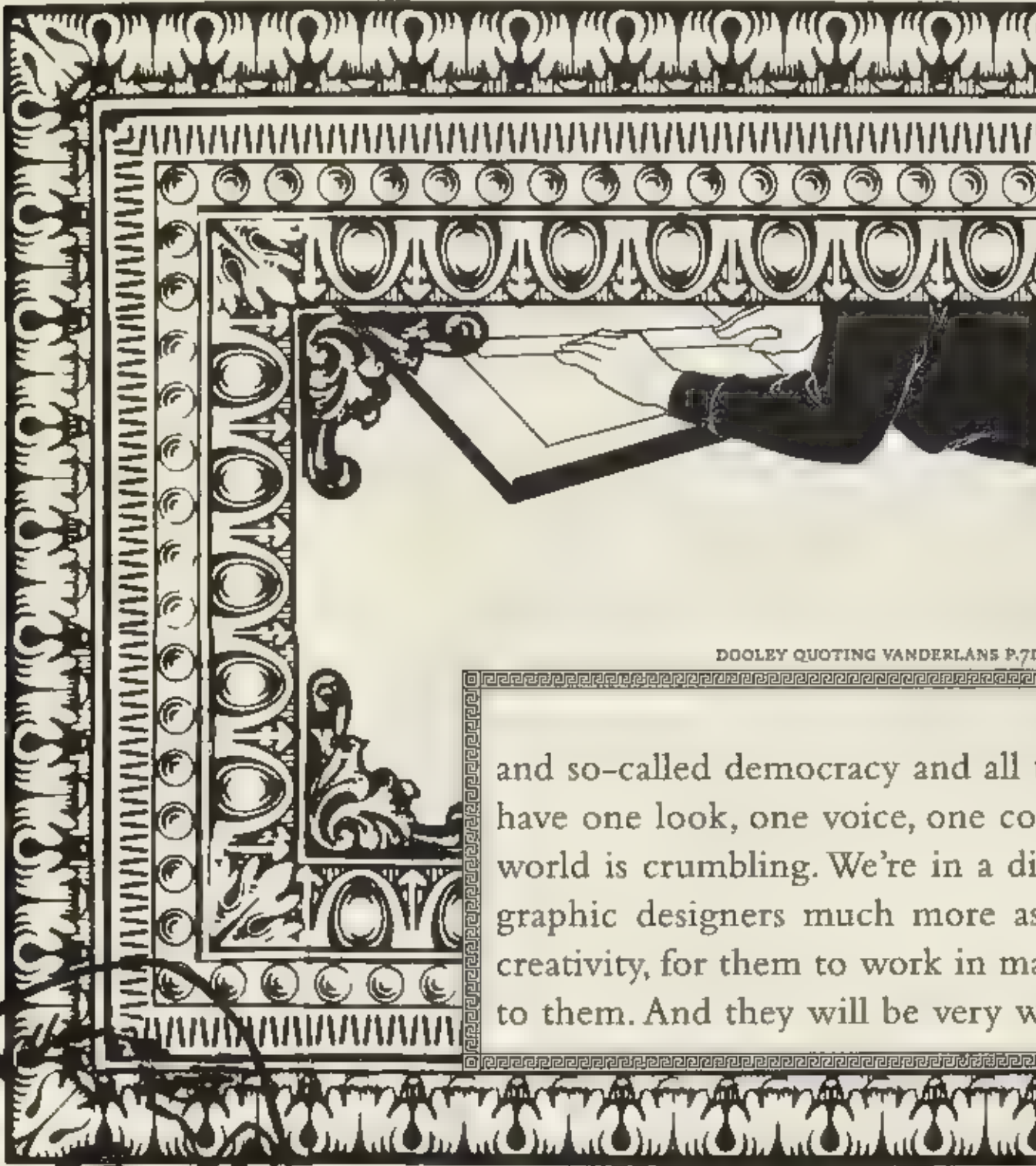
MCCOY P.50-51

With little "legitimate" history, a group is bound to erect a few rickety models for itself as it constructs a tenable identity. Ironically though, these contemporary calls to action would blend imperceptibly with almost any art manifesto springing from the first half of this century.



Surely designers suspect they live in the land of capital, in part just from being in business. The fact that the knowledge isn't mapped out in much of their writing indicates they are only obeying the first rule of capitalism: Ignore it.

Occasionally though, critics describe practice within its economic culture, often owing to the influence of contemporary Marxist-based cultural theory. To approach criticism so informed is to see capital's immutable presence, as the author of this statement notices, up to a point:



DOOLEY QUOTING VANDERLANS P. 71

early Modernist movement still provides a noble message about the role of design in effecting ^[sic] culture and lifestyle. The spirit of early pioneers such as Ruskin, Gropius, Wright, Schwitters, or Le Corbusier was that design—like art—would be a service and inspiration to humanity. . . .

But I don't think that the first pioneers of Modernism would have anticipated how our profession, and even the lifestyles of its practitioners, would have become so thoroughly dominated by purely economic and corporate values.

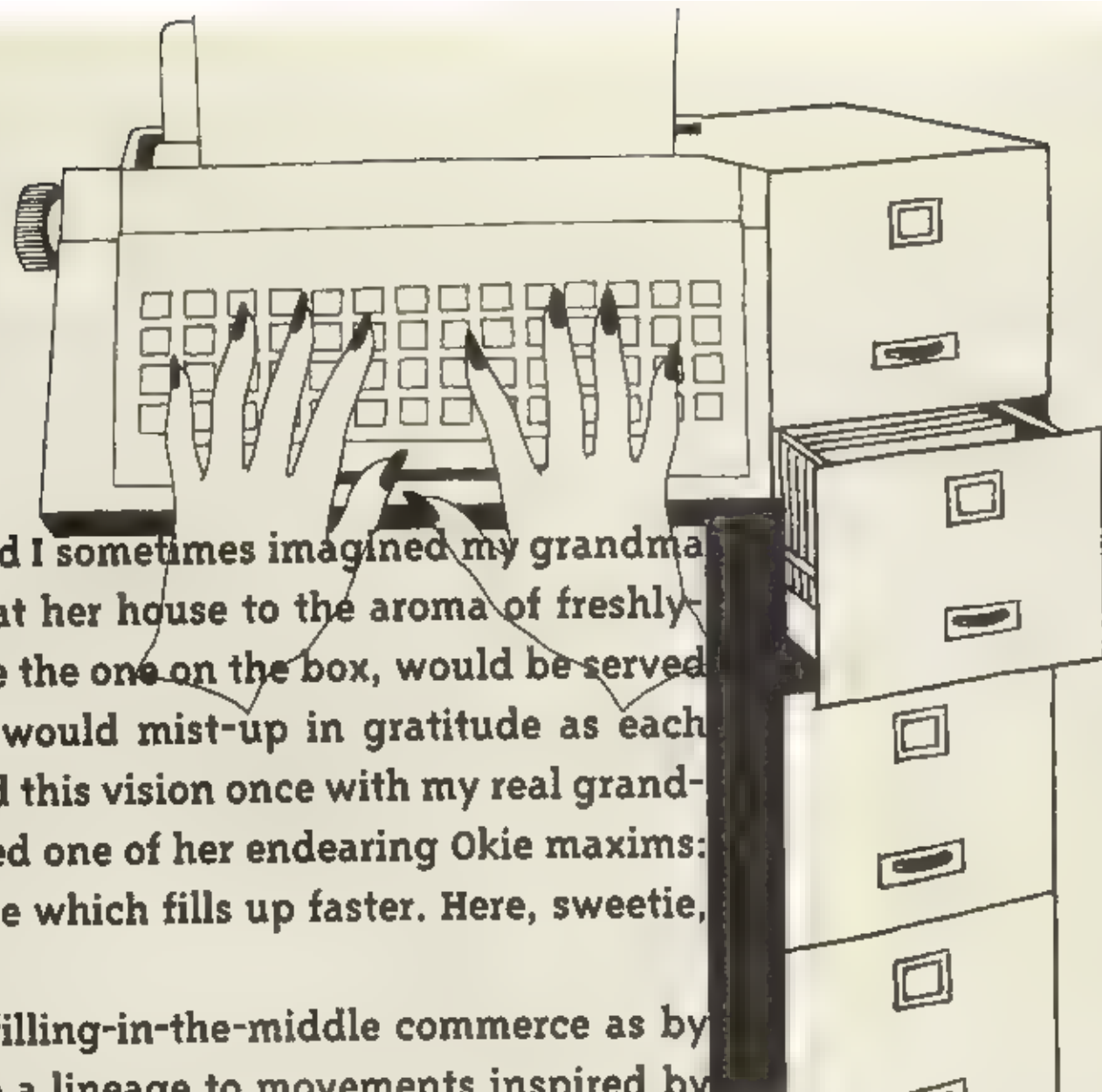
Strange. He suggests our errant economic values—made visible in part through the eyes of capitalism's critics—can be overcome. That we can pluck packaged ideals from history's chapters in order to remedy our dismal state. Strange, because the very same cultural criticism that led us to take note of capital also shows historical fact to be suspect, representative of a hegemony bonded to defend its own position. Even if we could accept the early fathers as being unencumbered by capitalist values akin to our own, I can't see how their ideals could extract us out of our mildew green economy into the rosy moral riches of Camelot. I see a modern-day sorcerer conjuring noble King Art and his Knights to hold tactical court in an uptown studio.

While some lament that seedlings planted by early utopian projects have been overgrown and suffocated by heedless consumerism, others might single out mid-century movements, declaring them an aberration propagated by a secluded elite:

Major capitalism and so-called democracy and all this corporate money that supported design so it had to have one look, one voice, one color, one typeface, all that neutral Swiss greedy stuff, that world is crumbling. We're in a different time. . . . We now see graphic designers much more as pluralists. And I think that's very healthy. That's true creativity, for them to work in many different ways according to the type of project given to them. And they will be very wild and incredibly brilliant.

Whether snatching a pithy reed from history and weaving it into a contemporary texture, or intimating that "true" creativity is the reserve of wild ones, (Fauves?), critical writing can inadvertently promote a handicapping premise: that design has been unceremoniously pinched from its ethical and expressive roots. When left unclarified, those roots are typically understood to be art. Not just any art either. Really good art. Truly fine art. Done by geniuses, visionaries and luminaries. The implicit presumption is that art is design's primary heritage.





Which reminds me of another story. I remember as a child I sometimes imagined my grandma was Betty Crocker. I would fantasize about arriving at her house to the aroma of freshly baked chocolate cake. A perfect slice, looking just like the one on the box, would be served up by a grandmother so finely mannered my eyes would mist-up in gratitude as each scrumptious forkful would melt into memory. I shared this vision once with my real grandma, a fry-cook from Arkansas. She smiled, then recited one of her endearing Okie maxims: "Put wishes in one hand and shit in the other and see which fills up faster. Here, sweetie, have a ding-dong."

Graphic design is and has been nurtured as much by filling-in-the-middle commerce as by absinthe and cream cakes. But because we can trace a lineage to movements inspired by artists—from Futurism to Constructivism, The New York School to Pop—many prefer to emphasize these culturally superior bloodlines. Designers and theorists tend to gaze past, or rather above, economic fact, sloughing off nagging evidence that their idealized ancestry doesn't quite fit with experience. Then they trot into the future wearing the same blinders.

"Maybe graphic designers should go back to the old business of inventing the future..." suggests one writer. I can think back to one old business that invented a future: The Ford Motor company. I wonder how they were as clients.

KEEDY P.103

And so we ought to turn to the designs of Bernhard, Cassandre, Garretto not for imitation but for inspiration. Although they aren't cathedrals or temples, they are monuments of a sort. They vividly represent the broader style of their era. True, by today's measure, these styles are now locked in time. But their makers were not prisoners of time.

What is apparent is that even though they tend to isolate themselves from its philosophical origins, many designers today are engaged in deconstructive design. That they should wish to isolate themselves from the origins of a philosophy so intertwined with the visual is unfortunate, as it seems to be the source for a significant change in graphic design. They should instead follow the example of the early pioneers of twentieth-century design: seek to understand these sources and engage them.

As these quotes suggest, a common tactic is to resurrect history as a standard, like taping "timeless" pages from the past on the bathroom mirror to ponder as we groom for the new day, or comparing the well-behaved sister to the bad one. The essay containing the last statement names among the exemplars Futurist Marinetti, Bauhausian Moholy-Nagy, and DaDa's Schwitters. These artists—who employed the medium of print production to advance their own agendas—functioned in specific political and commercial environments dramatically alien to issues graphic designers contend with as they face century twenty-one. We could ask why designers might isolate themselves from the origins of philosophy today. Is it possible that theory has the potential for becoming as commodified as design?

The kinds of questions we ask ourselves are, as it's said, critical.



HELLER P.38

BYRNE, WITTE P.121

Art can inform our inquiries, certainly. Probing its many histories—along with those of others—places design activity within its specific cultural boundaries. But when employed as an atlas, history is about as informative as a South Seas treasure map on a Nebraska interstate. Writing that harkens to art sans client, or that fuels nostalgic visions for a client-free future, undermines the potency of criticism, its ability to chart the intricacies of our environment, and, more profoundly, its capacity to bring newer horizons into sharp, navigable focus. So, what if we were to explore our real terrain, to soil our \$120 sneakers turning over rocks and splintery logs?—or poke at giant grub worms with our Mont Blanc pens? Perhaps more pertinent questions would begin to arise, ones that surveyed our daily stomping grounds.

How is our so-called voice altered when it interacts with the client-as-money-power? Historically, were the two reconciled? Can they ever be? Why do elaborate paper promotions instill bitter anguish in designers producing a one-color pamphlet for a shoe repair chain? How do profit concerns dictate what gets communicated in the culture at large? What are the inner-workings of a system that induces a nine-year-old girl to believe Betty Crocker to be more fabulous than Hostess? When we examine

design and practice isolated from economic issues, we serve capitalism's aims by diverting attention from all the hidden grit and tangle. Our view loses definition, our criticism lacks force.'

Conscious constraints can inspire new ways of thinking, but taboos eclipse the radiance of solid inquiry. Reducing or omitting capital's significance is fending off the inexplicable, the feared. We might as well find ourselves a Faye Ray: sacrifice an innocent by proxy to bolster desperate hope that King Klient will leave us alone so we can just get on with design. Then we could return refreshed to our dimly lit offices, grumble and cringe through some hack's derivative portfolio as we let somebody else contend with those annoying calls from you-know-who.

Quotes are from: *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design* edited by M. Bierut, W. Drenthel, S. Heller, DK Holland (New York: Allworth Press with AIGA, 1994) and *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger (London: Penguin Books, 1972)

1. See *On White Space: When Less is More*. Also notable are *On Overcoming Modernism* and *Low and High, Design in Everyday Life*

2. See also pages 46, 51, 102, 155, 157, 159, 161, 168, 173, 182, 187, 189, 193, 198, 217, 218, 225, 228, 231

3. I am uncomfortably aware that by reading these books and writing, I'm positioning myself among the "high" practitioners/critics who grapple with questions of how and where designers figure in the culture. I also must confess that I smirk with understanding every time I hear the tired joke: "design would be great if it weren't for the clients." But Berger's method of exposing the unspoken underpinnings of visual form production is one of many which has exposed the framework of my own opportunities and prejudices.

4. Of the essays included in this anthology, *Neomania: Feeding the Monster* opens the widest door to this conversation. Curiously, the chapter *In the End, It's Education* beats the other chapters for mentioning a client in every article. If there is a place the particular role of the client could be theoretically minimized, it is in pedagogy. But that's another essay.

Thank you to all my capitalist komrads: in particular, John Hartzog, for reading and commenting on what seemed to be endless revision. And to Anne Burdick for your consistent energy and astute ear. Also Sibylle Hagmann, Sally Howard, Kali Nikitas, and Lorraine Wild. Your insights and support are priceless to me...ehm. I mean, beyond calculable exchange value.



301



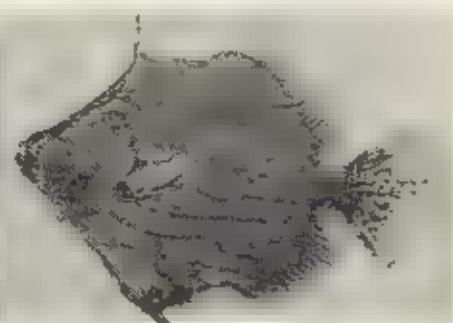
302



303



304



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306



307



308

308 caught sight of her Chrysler outside the supermarket, made a reckless turn and crashed into her to stop her escaping again. He was shouting uncontrollably: nothing that could be heard, less that made any sense, every sentence broken or choked by rage, as in, 'How else! Where you! Get away like this, away like this! Expect do you!' The children were terrified and started throwing punches at him from the back seat, telling him how he might have killed them all. Then the woman spilled out of the Chrysler and in a confusion of fury and abjection tossed her bag of shopping into the air. Rice and sugar rained down in front of her face, several cans of soup... a canteloupe. And, of course, it wasn't *her* at all; it was a different woman, a friend to whom she'd loaned the car for the afternoon. So the argument was now between perfect strangers, he stricken with shame and guilty excitement, she stunned that what had happened accidentally could have been so violently meant.

302-3 [Aug.] 9th. Bad day - curious scenery, constant dirty driving clouds, peeps of rugged snowy crags, blue glaciers, rainbows, squalls, a lurid sky. Strangers arrived; watched them from hill; retreated to little, beautiful cove. Later all quiet. The *infraspinatus* gradually uncovered.

304-5 [Aug.] 27th. Still slate grey and discouraging, the ocean quite abandoned. No birds feeding. No movement visible under the surface. The men became very disconsolate, so that in order to keep them entertained some of us made a model of a fish by picking open the seams of a soft leather wallet, then cutting and stitching the parts back together, adding braid, feathers, flakes of horn, and, for the eyes, two brass buttons hammered flat. Then the silly business of pretending it danced on a hook, was nearly reeled in, but escaped with a surprising flick of a black tail. All day nothing from the tow-nets, but then towards dark, under the microscope, luminescent stars, pink, greenish, barbed, coalescing. Said grace. No compulsion.

306 September 3rd. She shakes head, dozes. Legs outstretched or folded under. First *Sartorius*, then to *Vastus medialis* - *Tensor* - *Pectini*us - all soaped smooth. Evening sublime. Clouds soft white pillows, the ocean a china plate. From moment to moment as much may change or as little. Ships stuck fast like ours have been known to perform a complete revolution in a few hours, and 301 two ships, say twin *Desires*, beset a few furlongs apart, have been separated by several miles in the space of two or three days, the ice between them 307 never parting by as much as an inch: never a creak, never a groan. In such

President Clinton

SAY.... YOU GUYS
ARE ALL RIGHT!!
PICKIN' ON REAGAN, LIMBAUGH
AND GINGRICH IN
A TYPE SHOP MAGAZINE!
THAT'S GREAT. THAT'S
REALLY GREAT....

NOW SAY
SOMETHIN' NASTY
ABOUT GINGRICH'S
MOTHER. SOMETHIN'
LIKE "SHE HAS A
SERIF FETISH", OR
LIKE THAT....

YOU GUYS ARE
REALLY COOL:
"POST-MODERNIST."
I LOVE IT! IT'S
A REAL PISSER.
YOU KNOW HILLARY
& I LIKE DESIGN...
TYPE ...AH...

IT'S, AH....
LIKE ART OR
MTV STUFF,
RIGHT?



[Fax from Mark Andresen]

M.G. Lord
Our Barbies, Ourselves

Lori Loeb
The Image of Women
in Victorian
Advertisements:
Feathered Birds or
Gilded Warriors?

Hugh Merrill
Streamlined Women
and Color Cartoons:
The Influence of the
Early Years of Esquire
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Will Bradley and the
Origins of American
Graphic Arts
Promotion

Andrew Blauvelt
Great Ideas Revisited

Victor Margolin
Graphic Design in
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A History


Steven Heller
Earnest Elmo Calkins:
Advertising's First
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